

“Doors Open”

Deut. 10:12-21; Hebrews 13:1-3;
Matthew 7:7-14

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Life. What is life? How would you define it? In some ways, life is something we all know and want, but I suspect we would have a hard time defining it. Even if we try to define it biologically we have a hard time. The very first thing that I found when I looked at a definition for “life” was that we are not dead. I’m not sure that was very helpful. But it does, I think, suggest part of the difficulty of trying to figure out how to define life or how to paint that picture of it.

If I just look at how to define biological life, there are seven different ways of defining a biological system. It has to react to stimuli. It has to be able to maintain itself. It has to use energy—all these different things. But when you think about life, is that what you think about? “I have to take in enough food today so I have the right energy balance.” I don’t think about that.

What does it mean to have life? What is life? In some ways I think it’s something we all know, but it’s just so hard to define. I guess I could go back to the philosophers and hear what they have to say, but I think we all have a sense of what life is and I suspect that we all want to be alive. We want that life. We know that some of our choices along the way matter in being alive, but how do we decide? How do we join in? How do we make our lives as full and abundant as possible?

Jesus, in this whole sermon he’s been giving in Matthew, has been giving us some tips about that. Today’s passage gets to that as well. It begins by inviting us to do something. Sometimes that’s one of the hard parts. If we think about whether we really want to live, most of us would say, “Yes, I want to be alive!” But then we see there might be some risk and then we’re not so sure. We have this tug and pull around that.

For some reason, as I was thinking about all this, my mind kept going back to Tolkien and what he wrote in *The Fellowship of the Rings*. Towards the beginning of the book, they are thinking about what it means to be alive and go out your own door, to get out of your Hobbit hole and perhaps even leave the shire, to leave that protected place. Sometimes it’s easy to just want to stay in that protected place, but what happens is that we realize that we’re just existing—doing the same thing over and over. So what does Bilbo say to Frodo? He says, “It’s a dangerous business, going out your door. You step onto the road and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”

In some ways I believe we open that door and go out every moment, because it’s every moment that we’re moving into the future, opening to what’s going to happen next. We can try to make that “next” be the same all the time. Keep your feet. There’s no knowing where you’ll be swept off to. In fact I think that’s part of the adventure of life. There’s something about being alive that means being swept along or entering in to life.

Jesus is inviting us to enter in. He says it's not necessarily easy. "The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life." I think he's suggesting that it's going to take some energy. It's going to take some work on our part. We have to do something. Sometimes it's easy for me not to want to do a whole lot, to get in a rut. But Jesus is inviting us to do something. I think the passage as it starts today is part of what he's inviting us to do—to step outside of our own door, out of our hobbit hole, and get on the road. What does he suggest we do? We can ask.

Whenever you begin a journey it helps to have some idea where you might be going. When we were going to go on vacation this summer, we started asking people, "Where's a good place to go?" We began to get some direction. This asking is particularly of God in the process. Where should I go? I can walk out the door, but I have all kinds of choices. Where should I go? Let's ask. That's part of the process. Coming here, coming to the Bible, coming to Christ, coming in prayer—it's asking. I think going to the University and studying is asking. It is in the asking, especially as we do it in faith, that we recognize God is working with us. It's finding out that we will receive. It's interesting that what Jesus says is, "You shall receive." He doesn't say, "You will receive the answer you are looking for." But you will receive some kind of guidance, guidance on the way. So it begins by asking.

Then it continues to be active. Sometimes it feels like faith is something we put on and it is comfortable, then you sit back. It seems to me that Jesus is saying no, you ask and then you begin to find a direction. Then it involves searching. Where do we go? If we are looking for a particular door, a particular gate, a particular way of life, we have to begin searching. Maybe somebody gives us direction and says, "There's a door up ahead that you really need to find." It may not look like there's any door, so even with direction you still have to do some searching.

It reminds me again of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. These guys are on this epic journey and are going a long way. They know they now have to go through this underground passage called Moria. They get to a gate and it says "Speak friend and enter." They can't figure out what that means. Then they realize if you put the comma after "speak" it's speak: friend, and enter—all they had to do was say "friend." All you have to do when you get to the door is knock, and it opens. Do we want to go through a door to the next step? The door to faith is the beginning door. It takes the trust to at least knock and allow it to be opened for us.

Jesus is inviting us on this journey. Again, it reminds me of Gandalf talking to Bilbo. Bilbo asks, "You will promise that I will come back?" "No," Gandalf replies, "and if you do, you will not be the same." Do we want to be the same? We are invited on this journey of faith, to knock on the door, to know it will be opened to us. We know as we journey with God, we will not be the same.

Jesus gives us all these scenarios between parent and child to illustrate that if we know how to give good things to people, doesn't God? Don't you at least trust enough to ask and search and knock? You will receive, you will find, the door will be opened.

It's interesting to me that what he slides in there next is "Do to others as you would have them do to you." In some ways it seems out of place, except if we remember one of the ways Jesus works is to gather disciples. He gathers disciples so that we can work with each other. This journey we go on of asking, searching, and knocking is not one we go on alone. Sometimes we get to be the ones who respond to the asking. Just think about all the people in your life who you have asked and they have given you the help that you needed to continue on the journey. Or on your searching, people who came alongside you and by coming alongside helped you find the way. I even think that sometimes the Christ in us helps us open the door for someone who's knocking. We have a door to the sanctuary, a door to the church. We open it to those who come.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It's interesting. Help others ask and search and knock. Let the mutual love continue, it says in Hebrews, and we heard it in Ephesians as well. This is a journey we are called to through Christ and through our trust in God, and that we get to do together as we help and encourage and guide one another. It is a journey that Bilbo realizes is "a road that goes forever on, down from the door where it began. Now far ahead the road is gone and I must follow if I can."

Through faith, through treating each other as we would want to be treated, we can know the open door that God has for us and the narrow road that leads to life. Go in peace. Amen.

Gracious God, we are thankful that you call us to trust in you, to ask the questions we need to ask and to see where that leads us to search, to find the life you give us. Help us recognize the door and knock on it that you might open it, either through your people or straight through your grace. Lord, help us recognize that it is not always a wide door. We don't find it everywhere, but it is through you, through Christ that we can come and we can take that road that leads to life and do the work that lets life flower. Lord, be with us on this journey. Guide us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.