

“My door is always open.” That statement sounds like good news to most of us. If an employer, teacher, or elected official speaks those words to us with a welcoming smile, it means we can enjoy access to that person — that this worthy personage will make time for us, no matter what else may be going on. That’s the policy many clergy operate under as pastors. A few may publish office hours, but most of us are prepared to make time if the need is urgent. Figuratively speaking, our study doors are always open. A big part of ministry is offering people access to ourselves.

Now, imagine, just for fun, how great it would feel to find yourself on an elevator with your favorite movie star or recording artist — to have exclusive access to that person, if only for a few moments. After the late Queen Elizabeth’s death, a story again made the rounds, that back in 1982, the Queen had an unexpected nighttime visitor in her bedchamber. It happened in Buckingham Palace. Her Majesty awoke to see a strange man standing at the foot of her bed. She engaged him in conversation for a minute or two, then managed to covertly summon a guard. It turned out the man was mentally disturbed, but harmless. All he wanted was a little access to the Queen.

In today’s New Testament lesson, the Apostle Paul speaks about access — access to God’s grace. “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” he rejoices, “through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” The most important access of all — access to the grace of God, through Jesus Christ — is absolutely free. It cost Jesus a trip to the cross — but it costs us nothing!

A preacher, having given a sermon on grace in a small mining town, was approached at the church door by one of the miners. The man was looking distraught. He told the preacher he’d give anything if only he could believe that God really did forgive sins.

“I can’t believe he’ll forgive me if I just turn to him,” the miner admitted.
“It’s too cheap.”

“You were working in the mine yesterday, weren’t you?” the preacher asked.

“Yes, of course,” said the miner.

“And how did you get out of the pit?”

“The way I usually do; I got into the cage and was pulled to the top.”

“How much did you pay to come out of the pit?”

“Why, nothing,” the miner admitted.

“You weren’t afraid to trust yourself to the cage? Was it not too cheap?”

“Oh, no,” said the miner. “It was cheap for me, but it cost the company a lot of money to sink that shaft.”

As soon as he said it, a change came over the miner’s face. He saw the preacher’s meaning. Forgiveness is free for us — but it was purchased at a terrible price, a price paid by Jesus on the cross.

The essential task for those of us who claim to be followers of Christ— the one spiritual discipline from which all else flows — is to accept that truth. That’s what Paul means by “justification by faith.” We don’t deserve access to the amazing grace God offers us. We haven’t earned it. Yet, Christ offers it to us freely. We have only to accept the gift.’

The Polish astronomer Copernicus was one of the greatest scientists in history. But Copernicus was also a man of faith. He had these words inscribed on his tombstone: “O God, the faith that you gave to St. Paul I cannot ask, and the mercy you did show to St. Peter I dare not ask; but, Lord, the grace you did show to the dying thief on the cross — that, Lord, show to me.”

That grace is all any of us can claim. The thief crucified beside Jesus turns to him before he dies and says, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answers, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Access to grace. It’s a wonder we have it, but we do. The words of Jesus to us are that the door is always open. We can stay away if we wish, and we can engage in all manner of sinful lifestyles and activities, but when the time comes that we really need grace, when that day dawns and we’re ready to make a change, the door is always open.

Now, the Greek word Paul uses for “access” literally means “having an introduction.” It’s as though we were travelers to a foreign land, carrying with us letters of introduction to the court of the king. A great many of us already possess such a letter of introduction to a foreign government. That’s what a passport is, literally: a letter of introduction. If you, as a citizen of the United States, open your passport, you’ll read these words on the first page:

“The Secretary of State of the United States of America hereby requests all whom it may concern to permit the citizen/national of the United States named herein to pass without delay or hindrance and in case of need to give all lawful aid or protection.”

It’s a letter of introduction. When Paul celebrates “access to grace,” he’s picturing a small scroll, rolled up, and bearing the wax seal of a king or governor. You can’t cross the border without a passport; and you can’t experience the grace of God without presenting your “letter of introduction” — your confession of what Christ has done for you.

Of course, if you know anything about the Greek language, it probably wouldn’t surprise you to hear that there’s a second meaning to the Greek word for “access.” The Bible scholar William Barclay points out that it also has the sense of

a harbor or haven. Sailors always want to know where the nearest harbor is, so they can beat a straight course to safety in case a storm blows up.

Imagine what it's like to be on a small boat, far out to sea. You can barely glimpse the shoreline, a low smudge along the horizon. The sailors know the rough location of a small opening, an inlet, that leads to a sheltered harbor. Finding it, though, is like locating a proverbial needle in a haystack! Sailors think themselves fortunate if they have a lighthouse beacon to guide them, and, when the fog drops thick upon the surface of the sea, a foghorn calls out in its deep bass voice to guide them home.

Thankfully, God is not some distant, remote, uncaring being. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us personally. Christ is our letter of introduction, the lighthouse beacon that guides us into the safe harbor. And the Good news we discover in the Gospel stories about Jesus is that anyone who accepts Christ as Lord has access to God's grace. That's the good news. The door is always open for us. Yet, with this good news also comes responsibility. We, as Christians, have a responsibility to help others discover the same "access to God's grace" that is granted to us.

One way that churches with older facilities have done this, is to improve physical access to their church building. It's an essential act of evangelism to make sure that as many people as possible can physically get into the building, and without feeling embarrassed as they do so. What our government says we minimally have to do to comply with the law is really beside the point. Ensuring ready access to a Christian community for the maximum number of people is what's important.

Access is also why many congregations have put money into their budgets to provide safe, quality childcare during worship and other church activities. This has not always happened without opposition. There are always some older folks who object, saying something along the lines of, "Young families ought to be able to

pay for a babysitter, just like we did.” But times are different today. Many younger families are struggling to make ends meet, even on two incomes. The price of a babysitter — or the inconvenience of finding one — may be the only thing keeping a parent from having access to a spiritual growth opportunity.

Access is why, during the pandemic, nearly every church in the land found some money to install streaming audio and video equipment — and why it’s essential to keep on offering online services, even after it’s now possible for most to come back to safely worship in-person. The computers and smartphones nearly everyone owns are powerful access devices for all kinds of experiences. Why should the church be left out?

Access is why ministers and other church leaders take home communion to sick and elderly people who have a hard time getting out of their homes. They can’t join their church community in worship, so we bring the community to them.

Access also has to do with welcoming those who are different from us. For too long, as Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out years ago, Sunday morning at 11:00 has been the most segregated hour in American life. Are we really about the business of providing access, or are we trying to keep up appearances with mere lip service, saying things we think people want to hear, but that we don’t really mean?

What it really comes down to is whether we are willing to offer access to our very selves. We have received access to God’s grace, through Jesus Christ; and the response to this good news is that we are to open ourselves up, to make ourselves accessible to others as people.

Lesslie Newbigin, the renowned missionary bishop of the Church of South India, once said, “The knowledge of God comes to any person never through the skylight but always through the door.” It is by the witness of others that we most easily learn about Jesus Christ — not by reading gospel tracts, not by hearing Scripture quoted at us by radio preachers, but by honest sharing with other

Christians, people who care enough to let us into their lives, in small ways or large. It happens in a Sunday school classroom, or over a cup of coffee at a reception. It happens through a handshake or a fist bump during the greeting time in the worship service, through the words, “Peace be with you.” It happens in a casual conversation in the workplace, or while waiting in line at the bank. Many and marvelous are the opportunities to subtly and honestly offer ourselves to others so that, when they get to know us as people, they may discover also the faith within us.

As Christians, we’re called to live as people of the open door — receiving grace, holding the door open for others, and holding ourselves open for others. God’s Grace, says the Christian ethicist Lew Smedes, is “an amazing power to look earthy reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts ... and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God’s good earth. Grace is power ... to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know that, somehow, in the center of your life, ‘It’s all right.’”

May we all come to learn, day by day, to rely on God’s grace alone. Trusting in God’s promises, may we know ever more fully God’s grace as we have seen it in Jesus Christ. And may we realize, in the deepest part of us, that our Lord truly offers us access to God’s grace now and always! And Thanks be To God for that. Amen.