LOVE BEHIND MY GATE

Pilgrim Congregational Church

April 2, 1972 - Easter

Romans 8:28-29

Back near the turn of this century a man set sail by steamer from New York to Liverpool. He traveled alone. His wife had died a few years earlier, and his eleven-year-old son remained behind with relatives. There was an unusual closeness between father and son, and it was hard for the father to go alone, but once before on a trip to England the child became seriously ill. So he stayed behind, apparently in excellent health. But when the father landed in Liverpool, he learned that his son was dead.

Many years later the father found the composure to tell the story of that event. He wrote:

> "I know now, as I look back across the years, that nothing has carried me up into the life of God, or done more to open out the infinite meaning of love, than the fact that love can span this break of separation, can pass beyond the visible and hold right on across the chasm. The mystic union has not broken and knows no end..... When my sorrow was at its most acute stage I was walking along a great city highway, when suddenly I saw a little child come out of a great gate, which swung to and fastened behind her. She wanted to go to her home behind the gate, but it would not open. She pounded in vain with her little fist. She rattled the gate. Then she wailed as though her heart would break. The cry brought the mother. She caught the child in her arms and kissed away the tears. 'Didn't you know I would come? It is all right now.' All of a sudden I saw with my spirit that there was love behind my shut gate."
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> (From "The Luminous Trail" by Rufus Jones)

What happened on the first Easter was like that. Exactly what happened we cannot say. But this much we can say at the very least: that shattered band of men and women who followed Jesus to the Cross, discovered a great surge of love breaking through the shut gate of their disillusion and their grief. The same love they had met in their dying Lord, broke through to them again.

The story is told of two travelers who visited the famous Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. After the Turkish conquest this ancient Byzantine church was made into a mosque, and its beautiful mosaics were whitewashed over. But as one of the travelers looked up toward the magnificent dome, he noticed that some of that obliterating paint was wearing away. A bit of the ancient art-work showed through the peeling. It was the face of Christ.

"See," said the traveler, "He's coming back. He always comes back."

My friends, I don't know how he came back. Like so many of you I have difficulty accepting literally the strange and somewhat conflicting ways in which the New Testament describes his coming back. But that in some way he did come back - that was the happening that set those heart-broken disciples on fire. That was the happening without which the Christian church would not have lasted 20 days to say nothing of 20 centuries.

Whatever else we make of it - this much is the message of Easter. The man of Nazareth came back through the shut gate of death - came back by the power of his love.

Ever since then people have known that there was love behind the shut gate of death - both the death of others and their own death.

Some years ago the United Church Herald published a moving account of the last days of a doctor. Reared a Moslem in the middle-East, he had set up practice in a small city in Illinois and joined one of our churches there. Suddenly at the age of 41 he realized that he was dying of cancer. He sent a letter to his patients describing his situation. He wrote:

> "I feel, of course, that it is unfortunate to have such a condition at the age of 41, but, like some of my fine patients, fellow citizens for whom I had the privilege of caring, my family and I must accept this fate..... I am confident that I shall find strength and courage through God and your friendships for these days and those that follow."

Not long after he died. But his friends recalled how he had found in Jesus not only an example of good living, but of good dying. And they remembered his words:

> "It all fits together so beautifully, like jewels on a crown, this redeeming love of Christ for us and for me."

In Christ there is a love that swings wide the gates of death - not only the gate of grief, but the gate that closes round us when we anticipate our own dying.

But the gates of death are not the only gates that have a way of shutting so tight we cannot open them. Life too poses its fixed barriers. The apostle names a few of them - "tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, or sword." He knew them personally, Paul did. They were part of his daily experience. And they are still around. I believe that we could find them all in the Sunday paper.

But perhaps we can appreciate the shut gates life imposes if we think of situations less dramatic.

Th nk of the older person who lives alone in a rented room. He lives in a world that gradually grows more constricted physically, spatially, socially. The limit of his outlook on the world is the blank wall of the adjacent building. His daily business is defined by the routine of caring for a few square feet of household. His social life is mostly memories of people long gone and an occasional greeting from the mailman. He lives a life hemmed in, hemmed in by loneliness. And in the bitterness of his isolation even the gates within himself shut down. He becomes closed to the love of man and God.

Or think of the young person thrown into a world he neither understands nor respects, thrown there with the demand that he make a place for himself within it. He tries being part of the system, but that seems so plastic, so morally destructive, that he cannot bear to live there. He tries to move within the so-called counter-culture, but finds there only a spreading sickness and in the end the same patterns of pride and

fakery he found in the establishment world. He tries a little drugs, and he tries a little astrology; he tries a little religion and he tries a little politics; he tries a little street-living and he tries a little tent-living. All the while the gates close tight between him and his family. He becomes in the end a kind of hobo, not much different from those of yesteryear except in his vocabulary. He drifts ceaselessly around that circular track within himself.

Or think of the divorced woman. For years she struggled to maintain a broken relationship. Then at last the gates between her and her former husband were slammed in place, and rust settled in every hinge. And now there is within her a great wall like the great wall of China that stretches as far as her feelings, or her thoughts, or her imagination can reach. No matter what she does, no matter who she is with, she can never break through the parapets of that hurt and that rage.

Or think of the drop-out clergyman. He is caught up in the conflicting pressures of the times - torn between the role of pastor and prophet - between the demands of sustaining the institution and challenging the institution to lose its life for the sake of the world - between speaking the truth in love and speaking to a congregation. He finds himself in a situation I heard described last week by a well known local minister - a man who once dropped out himself. He said he came to a situation in which he no longer felt he could be true to his calling and do what people in the church expected of him. So the minister drops out, thinking perhaps that the church establishment will hail him as a martyr, especially since the church establishment press has spent so much time telling him that his former role was passé anyway. But immediately he finds that he becomes an unperson. So far as the denomination is concerned he ceases to exist. Once he turns his back on the institution all the gates close around him. And despite his glee at prophesying the church's death, there is a line from an old hymn that keeps running through his mind:

"I love thy church, O God; her walls before thee stand,
Dear as the apple of thine eye, and graven on thy hand."

These are common cases. We all know them. They are cases where the gates shut closed; where people are hemmed in, not by death, in the literal sense, but by what happens in the midst of life. These are cases where people get cut off, not only from other people, but in the end from the source of their own being. They are people who close the door on God as they close the door on themselves.

So then it is very important that Paul should say: "I am sure that neither death, nor life.....can separate us....." For it is not only at the hour of death, but in the midst of our living that the message of Easter comes. Right now there is a love that breaks through the barriers.

I don't know what your shut gate is like. It may be the gate of grief, or the gate of fear. It may be the gate thrown up by prejudice. It may be the gate of a broken relationship. It may be the gate of smug indifference - the gate of a life withdrawn to the safety of petty pleasures and conventional affections, a life protected from the mystery, the wonder and the agony in the depths of things. But whatever kind of gate your gate may be, of this I am sure:

There is love behind it. There is love with the power to lift the latch and take you in. There is the same love that spoke to you from the fishing boat and which forgave you from the Cross. It is there; it will always be there; it is there for you.