

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

August 3, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Luke 9: 46-50

Have you ever thought of the church as a fellowship of strange bedfellows? Folks with whom you would normally not rub shoulders. Folks very unlike yourself in so many ways. O the strange bedfellows I have encountered in a lifetime of church membership! Same for you? I suspect so.

Well, the disciple John resisted that idea strenuously. You remember John, a member of Jesus' inner circle, along with Peter and James. Jealous for his master's reputation, John did not want anyone trafficking in Jesus' good name. And so he was appalled that a strange exorcist was using the name of Jesus to cast out demons. All without permission!

Hear John's complaint: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." To John, such an

unauthorized use of Jesus' name was infringing upon their franchise rights. That had to be stopped in its tracks. No way that an outsider should capitalize on the miraculous power of Jesus!

Let us admit that we know that attitude, don't we? It is the most natural feeling in all the world. We find ourselves circling the wagons around "our Jesus", the one we subscribe to. We become reputation protectors of the One we serve. We do not want his good name rubbed in the dirt by strange exorcists or anybody else. Didn't Jesus himself once say, "Those who are not with us are against us"? (Luke 11: 23)

Maybe this is what John was thinking: "You've got to keep it in the family. Put it out in the public domain and it gets twisted. You know how people always distort the truth. Your brand name could be ruined. If you are not with us, surely you are against us."

So John is one of us. We understand John. I understand John. I am often appalled at what people do and say in the

name of Jesus. They seem to be peddling a Jesus I don't recognize. How dare they besmirch the Lord's reputation! Isn't that "taking the Lord's name in vain"? I feel John's protest rising up in my heart. Sometimes I just want to issue a "cease and desist order." Wait! Am I starting to sound like John?

But Jesus will not let John set the agenda for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is far more gracious, far more generous than John could imagine. Jesus corrects his well-intended follower with these words: "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is for us." Mark's version says this: "Do not forbid him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me." So Jesus displays an amazing openness to a strange exorcist who worked without prior authorization. Jesus implies that this outsider could well be a fellow traveler in the Kingdom of God. So he endorses anyone who does good on behalf of the Kingdom of God. With or without permission.

Consider Jesus' openness: "For those who are not against us are for us." What a generous spirit. Jesus seems to issue a broad invitation to anyone on the outside looking in. He leaves the door wide open for all kinds of strange exorcists, odd ducks, camp followers and strange bedfellows. This is the Good Shepherd who said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold: I must bring them also" (John 10: 16). This is the Beloved Master who said of the children: "Do not hinder them for to such belong the Kingdom of God."

This is the Teacher who told a parable about inviting the "poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" to a banquet. This is the Reconciler who called a tax collector and a Zealot to follow him, Matthew and Simon, strange bedfellows in the company of Jesus. Polar opposites, sworn enemies, one a collaborator with Rome, the other a deadly opponent of Rome. Both invited to accompany Jesus. And we think we have political differences in the church!

The Gospels often remembered Jesus' words and deeds, because they addressed issues in the early church. One issue was the outsider, the odd duck, the strange exorcist. Take for instance, Saul of Tarsus. That Saul who was breathing fire upon the early Christians, standing by as Stephen was stoned, sent to imprison believers in Damascus.

But after seeing the Risen Christ, Acts 9 tells us that Saul, now called Paul, comes to Jerusalem. To say that there were doubts about his sincerity would be an understatement of Biblical proportions! The text says quite simply, "The disciples were afraid of him, for they did not believe he was a disciple." An outsider, a source of terror, a sworn enemy of the Gospel. The "John factor" was hard at work. How can you trust someone with such a checkered past?

Until Barnabas showed up. This trusted follower of Jesus vouched for Paul's authentic vision of the Risen Christ. He vouched for his courageous witness to the Gospel in Damascus. Barnabas reverses the "John factor", the distrust

of the outsider. Barnabas speaks for Jesus who once said, “Those who are not against us are for us.” So Barnabas welcomes the ministry of this fierce opponent turned passionate friend of the Gospel. The doors of the church are always open to anyone and everyone, regardless of their background, regardless of the skeletons in their closet.

And isn't that precisely the heart of the Good News, that God takes on human flesh and dwells among us, even us. Doesn't Jesus seem careless about the kind of people he befriends, utterly blind to their obvious faults? Even seems attracted to the scandal ridden and the flagrant sinners. Jesus throws his arms around all kinds of people, especially the misfits and the losers.

Think how he has welcomed all of us. We who are strange beyond belief, twisted in a thousand different ways. Even we are embraced and held and accepted and loved. The outlaws and the angry, the dissidents and the indifferent, the self-righteous and the self-absorbed. Gracious heavens, Jesus does not seem to care what we

have done or our dark shadows or the trail of tears we have left behind us. It just doesn't matter to this utterly gracious Savior who knows your past and loves you anyway.

Are we not all strange bedfellows gathered here for worship today? Let's divulge the church's best kept secret. None of us deserve to be here in the presence of God. And yet, here we are. By the sheer grace of God. If word got out on the street just how gracious Jesus really is, would we have room for all the strange bedfellows who would show up here? I really mean that. Imagine if we changed our advertising to read: "Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church, a place where no one belongs. A place where everyone belongs."

My oldest son Aaron, his wife Shelby and their two children live in Kerrville, Texas, recently hit by deadly flooding. In this ruby red part of Texas, one of the first groups to arrive on the scene to help was a search and rescue team from Mexico City called "Los Topos", which means "the moles". They got that nickname from their heroic work after

the 1985 Mexico City earthquake rescuing people from the rubble. “Los Topos” arrived in Kerrville a full week before FEMA got there. Though at first the locals were suspicious of these “foreigners”, these “outsiders”, their tireless energy endeared them to the entire Kerrville community. Shoulder to shoulder American citizens and Mexican nationals worked to help find the victims. Funny how a disaster makes for strange bedfellows,

So as you come forward this morning to receive God’s love and mercy at this Table, look at who is standing beside you. A sinner much like yourself, saved by grace alone. A strange bedfellow like yourself, welcomed by the same Lord and Savior who loved you and gave himself for you. And consider it a privilege and blessing to rub shoulders with these amazing sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. To walk with them and journey with them in the light and love of Christ our Risen Lord-what a privilege! What a joy! Thanks be to God! Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

August 10, 2025

SEE YOU IN COURT

I Corinthians 6: 1-8

In 1977 the Supreme Court in *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona* allowed attorneys to advertise their services. Have they ever since! Over the years I have noticed a proliferation of attorney ads both on television and billboards. It seems to me that these ads have two purposes. The first is to build name recognition and the other is to make big promises.

You know the importance of a brand name or a logo. For instance: Hurt, call Bert. Ring the Bell. The Tank. The Law Giant. I am New Mexico. As local as red or green for 40 years. Call a face who works your case. Your fight is our fight. Motorcycle accident? Call the Law Tiger. The Name you know. There's them, then there's us. The power to win. Keller wins. Make it Right-Wrongful Deaths NM. We win big. Truck wrecks are our business. If you're hurt, call us first. Get justice, start healing. And brand new this week: The Red Headed Legal Lady. Do you recognize any of these firms?

And the second purpose of these attorney ads is to promise a big payday. For instance: Millions recovered. Billions recovered. \$59 million for truck wreck, death. \$20 million for leg amputation. Hit by a truck, hit back. Dail 4, get more. Get big results. One call, that's all. Results matter. In a crash, need cash? Hit by a drunk driver, think big. You don't pay till we win. We mean business. You get the picture here? I suppose justice now just means quick cash.

Now before you think I am lawyer bashing, you must know that two of my best friends are lawyers. Really. And I have known many honorable attorneys in my lifetime. Actually, I like lawyers. Now the ones who advertise are a tiny fraction of that honorable profession. In fact, John Calvin was first a lawyer before he became a theologian. So the law has always been held in high esteem in the Presbyterian tradition. OK, so have I covered all my bases here?

But the truth of the matter is that we are a litigious society. In its quest for cash, the legal profession can be corrupted like any other profession. Remember "Better Call Saul"? Recently two well-known Albuquerque attorneys pled guilty to conspiring with police officers to fix DWI cases. Some lawyers use their skills for all sorts of dishonest purposes. But remember, the bottom five percent of every

profession sadly does not live up to its oath of office. Like corrupt pastors! Same story.

Which brings us to I Corinthians 6. Paul has a problem on his hands. Some of these young Christians were suing each other in court, the Roman courts. Paul was aghast! We do not know what the disputes were about. But the fact that Christians would sue other Christians in a pagan court was just beyond the pale. Paul called it a “defeat for you.”

Paul’s first reaction is very counter-cultural, then and now. The apostle suggests that it’s preferable to be wronged and defrauded than go to court against a fellow believer. Say again, Paul? It appears that Paul is saying don’t press your case even if you have valid reasons. Airing one’s dirty laundry against a fellow believer in a pagan court would be far worse, truly shameful in Paul’s mind.

By the way, Jesus would seem to mirror Paul’s reluctance to go to court. Jesus suggests that if you are accused of a wrong, be sure to “come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him.” In other words, seek a settlement outside court. Or you may be thrown in jail until you “have paid the last penny” (Mt. 5:26). These are the words of a vulnerable minority before a Roman judge.

Paul's second reaction is very practical. Paul suggests that the Corinthian church should select someone in their midst discerning enough to judge the case. By the way, our denomination has a Book of Discipline that guides judicial cases within the Presbyterian Church. We settle what Paul calls "ordinary matters" in house. I wish our fellow Presbyterians would have heeded Paul's advice when they went to court to take their church property with them upon withdrawing from the denomination. Alas.

But the reason Paul gives for judging their own disputes is truly counter-cultural. And if you have never heard of this, don't be surprised. Paul says surely you can settle your own cases since Christians "will judge the world." Then he adds-astonishingly-that "we are to judge the angels." Oh my! Similarly, Jesus told the disciples that when he returns in glory that the Twelve Apostles will "sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt. 19:28).

What are Jesus and Paul talking about? Both seem to be pointing to an exalted role for followers when the Son of Man returns. I don't pretend to understand all this. And by the way, it is a very minor note in the New Testament. Why don't we simply say that both Paul and Jesus envision a role for Christians in the Last

Judgment that is quite mysterious. It's Paul's way of saying that because of your future exalted role, you can surely handle conflicts within the church. The rest is a mystery yet to be revealed.

Now what are the important takeaways from the words of Jesus and Paul? We should not turn their words into a kind of "New Law" for Christians. Rather, their words are a challenge for us to see the world differently than the lawyer billboards advertise-the world of financial rewards.

Now there are, of course, legitimate uses of our courts. This week I had lunch with a Christian paralegal who helps attorneys file suit on behalf of disabled children denied their rights. I applaud his work. And there are serious legal charges that secular courts must handle, like felonies of all kinds. We need a judiciary that is fair and just, one that is truly impartial.

But for Christians to take other Christians to court is in the mind of Paul simply intolerable. It presents a terrible witness to the world. For Paul, sometimes it is better to be wronged than to be right in court. For Jesus, try to settle with your accuser before you even go to court. Work it out, go to mediation. Can we hear these challenging words?

Imagine the kind of lawyer billboards that would feature Paul and Jesus. A picture of Paul with these words: “There’s them, then there’s us. No contest.” A picture of Jesus with these words: “Settle. Agree. Mediate. Before you lose it all.” Such advertising would probably not get the law firm of Jesus and Paul much business, would it?

So this is the astonishing counter-cultural vision of the Kingdom of God. Its operating instructions are radically different than the world’s. The Kingdom of God invites us “to be transformed by Christ” into New Creatures. People so very different from what the world typically presents.

That means we leave our nets behind and risk all for the Lord. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. We lend without expecting anything in return. We give the coat off our back. We forgive seventy times seven. Sometimes we just let things go. And the two hardest challenges of all—love your neighbor as you love yourself. Do unto others as you would have done to you. A lifetime challenge indeed! That is why Jesus says, “Count the cost” before you follow him. This is truly “costly grace”.

Now all these admonitions make the Christian life seem impossibly difficult. In truth, Reinhold Niebuhr once called the Christian life “the impossible possibility.” Yes, it seems quite beyond us to become the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. But then we confess with gratitude and amazement, “With God all things are possible.” All things! Even the “impossible possibility” of being transformed by Christ into New Creatures. People the likes of which the world has seldom seen. So see you in court? Maybe not.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

August 17, 2025

THE EYE OF THE STORM

Luke 12: 49-56

Once I had dinner with a bright young Christian college student named Lindsey. She had just returned from a semester abroad in Jordan, which also took her to Turkey, Lebanon and Israel. I truly wish every college student could study abroad. It is often a transformative experience.

And so it was for Lindsey. She had stayed with a Christian family in Jordan, a deeply devoted couple with two children. For them a commitment to Jesus Christ meant something truly counter-cultural. This family lived in a Muslim majority nation next door to a Jewish majority nation in Israel. As Christians, they felt keenly their minority status, in truth, their vulnerability in the midst of terrorist threats.

Lindsey told me this was the first time she realized just how controversial Jesus really is. Not just two thousand years ago, but every day in Jordan she saw the risk of being a Christian. She

discovered that only in the privacy of their home or in the fellowship of their church was it possible to speak openly about Jesus. In truth, there are many places in the world still where discussing Jesus entails a certain risk.

The reality is this. In his own day Jesus WAS very controversial. This rabbi from Nazareth faced constant conflict, opposition and misunderstandings. That was the burden of his life. In our reading from Luke, Jesus acknowledges the reality he faced day by day. He announced that he had come to cast fire upon the earth. And so his deeds and his words brought division. His mere presence sparked a firestorm wherever he went.

Thus, Jesus lived in the eye of the storm. He did not bring peace and tranquility nor did he soothe the status quo. He brought discord within families and households, bitter divisions between family members. In truth, that conflict invaded Jesus' own family. Initially his family thought he was out of his mind and tried to stop him.

Incidentally, my own father considered me a "minister in the synagogue of Satan". That's because I left the fundamentalist church of my youth and became a Presbyterian. He felt that way

until the day he died. So I understand this passage in a deeply personal way.

In the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas Jesus announces, “Whoever is near to me is near to the fire.” Indeed, many did not get him and many opposed him. The Gospel of John describes his life poignantly: “He came into his own and his own received him not.” Not only did his family think he was crazy, but his closest followers deeply misunderstood him.

The religious leaders accused him of all manner of evil, including blasphemy and demon possession. And the political leaders saw him as a threat and eventually conspired to do away with him. Jesus was certainly “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Rejection by his own people led to his baptism of death upon the cross.

It occurs to me that Jesus will forever be controversial, even among his followers. Christians are in the same position as Americans and the British—two countries separated by a common language. So many Christians use the name of Jesus, but he means very different things to his various followers. And so the church remains deeply divided world-wide.

But Jesus stands among us, his splintered Christian followers, and still asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Sadly, our answers differ widely. And yet Jesus yearns for his Body to be healed of its many divisions. He offers us his Spirit of peace, yet we struggle to find unity. Jesus is controversial among us even yet.

Jesus is controversial among the world religions, especially the Abrahamic faith traditions. Still a stone of stumbling that divides us. Jesus stands between us and our Jewish brothers and sisters. He stands between us and our Muslim sisters and brothers. This is a family quarrel between the many children of Abraham and Sarah. Jesus remains an imposing presence and he still asks the same question of all the children of Abraham, “Who do you say that I am?”

Jesus is controversial still among the political rulers of our times. Whether Jesus is pushed out of some cultures or is used to bolster some cultures, he remains elusive. He cannot be excluded and he cannot be co-opted. He is still Lord of all nations and subject to none.

And Jesus still confronts the powerful of this world with a challenge. He will always be the Prince of Peace who stands over against our warring madness. He will always be the Lord of the conscience demanding justice and fairness. He will always stand

beside the least of these our sisters and brothers so often marginalized. To every ruler who asks cynically, “What is truth?” Jesus answers, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” He cannot be silenced or coerced.

My hope is that Jesus will always be controversial. As the old adage says, “Christ has come to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.” We can never domesticate him or make him a mere calming bromide. Why? Because Jesus never lets us off the hook. He never allows us to settle for anything less than our best. He unsettles us. He generates discontent within our spirits. Discontent with the brokenness of the church. Discontent with the nations of this world. In truth, when the spirit of Jesus grabs us, then we understand these words, “May the Peace of Christ disturb you immensely.”

My fondest hope is that the spirit of Jesus always remain controversial to us. He contends with us when we throw up hands in surrender. He wants to light a fire within our hearts that burns within us. He wants to give us a laser focus on what needs to change in our own lives and in the world around us. Jesus persistently urges us to care more, give more, love more, extend ourselves more.

This is an uncomfortable Jesus, even an inconvenient Jesus. “I come to bring fire to the earth.” Discontent and discomfort. “I have come to bring division.” Not an easy peace, sitting on our hands. But rather, a “fire in the belly” to motivate us with a renewed passion for justice and reconciliation and redemption. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.” Not peace, but a fire burning in our hearts. “Whoever is near to me is near the fire.”

OK. So let’s take a breath. Please know that this is a sermon I need to preach to myself periodically. If it happens to strike a chord within you, then God bless. Maybe what I need to say to myself and perhaps what you need to say to yourself is this: “Jesus is relentlessly pursuing us, that Hound of Heaven we cannot escape. And our hearts are restless until they find rest in our Lord. So may his peace light a fire in your heart. And I pray his peace lights a fire in mine. Thanks be to God. Amen.”

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

August 24, 2025

FREED AND HEALED

Luke 13: 10-17

When I was in elementary school in the 1950's, Oral Roberts came to my hometown of Tyler, Texas. He rented an old coliseum sometimes used as a professional wrestling venue for a revival and healing service. Back then Oral Roberts did not have a university in Tulsa or a television show. He was a traveling evangelist and healer and quite the celebrity across the Bible Belt. An advertising blitz on the radio invited all those with infirmities to come and be healed.

Well, the Oral Roberts buzz caused quite a stir in my little town. Indeed, people from all over East Texas flocked to the old coliseum to be healed by this famous preacher. Several of my classmates went and reported how Oral Roberts laid his hands on all kinds of people-even those with polio. Some dramatically took off their braces and walked off stage under their own power or so it seemed. Oh my! Now that was sensational news, especially in those years

right after Dr. Jonas Salk had introduced his polio vaccine against that dread disease.

Now I never saw Oral Roberts in person, but I remember vividly the controversy his healing service generated at my school. There was a small but vocal pro-Oral Roberts faction who considered him a gift of God. But the majority, the anti-Oral Roberts faction, considered him a charlatan. Now this was pretty heady theological stuff for a young boy at Birdwell Elementary School in the 1950's.

I suspect Jesus generated similar controversy when he came to the small towns of Israel. His reputation often preceded him. Now people lined up either for or against this traveling preacher and healer from Nazareth. Some questioned his power to heal. Some even charged that he was in league with Satan to do such wonders. Others may have thought of him as Asklepios, the Greek God of healing. Some may have considered him like Pharoah's magicians who replicated Moses' first three miracles in Exodus 7 and 8. And many just weren't sure what to make of him.

So when Jesus goes to a synagogue on the Sabbath, there must have been quite a buzz. Luke tells us that Jesus was teaching when he observed a woman bent over. Perhaps she suffered from curvature of the spine, that is, scoliosis. That debilitating condition

had afflicted this daughter of Israel for eighteen years. Jesus must have felt compassion for her. So he calls out to her, “Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.” Then Jesus lays his hands upon her and immediately her back is healed. She stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years. What a moment!

Now people who have endured such a condition can only imagine how wonderful that felt. Or anyone suffering from any kind of back issue could only wish to be so healed. To stand erect again, without pain! This woman freed and healed does exactly what you would expect. She rejoiced and praised God. I suspect she was leaping for joy. And so was everyone else in the synagogue.

Except for the leader of the synagogue. Instead, he became indignant. And why? Because Jesus dared to heal on the Sabbath. This leader considered Jesus’ miracle to be work on the Sabbath, something strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses. The four Gospels report that Jesus performed seven different healing miracles on the Sabbath. Those healed suffered from various infirmities: withered hand, unclean spirits, fever, swelling of the feet, paralysis, blindness, plus the woman’s curvature of the spine in our text.

Now the issue for the leader of the synagogue is working on the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest. He rebukes Jesus with words that

reflect the Fourth Commandment: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, but not on the Sabbath day.” He was not opposed to healing, just healing on the Sabbath.

I remember driving around West Jerusalem with an Arab Christian one Saturday in 1994. He pointed out to us entire neighborhoods blocked off to traffic by Orthodox Jews. These deeply religious folks felt that driving a car was a violation of the Sabbath law. Our driver told us that driving a car on the Sabbath in those neighborhoods put your life at risk. People would throw stones at your car, showing how serious this was to Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem.

The issue of doing work on the Sabbath was a very serious matter in the early church as well. Should they abide by the Sabbath regulations or were they freed from such injunctions? Surely the stories of Jesus healing on the Sabbath were intended to exempt the early church from those regulations. Especially since Jesus insisted that the Mosaic Law allows people to untie farm animals on the Sabbath to lead them to water. That is, work was permissible when life was at stake.

Thus Jesus did his work of healing to give life to this woman in need, even on the Sabbath. In an earlier controversy, Jesus insisted that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. In other words, the Sabbath should be life affirming, not simply a legalistic requirement.

The most amazing thing about this story is that Jesus frees and heals this hurting woman. The second most amazing thing is this- Jesus honors the Sabbath by affirming life on this sacred day. And the people in the synagogue who saw it rejoiced at what happened to this woman. And I can imagine they all shouted out, “Le chayim”. Which means in Hebrew: “To life!”

So a woman is healed in the synagogue on the Sabbath. She comes to worship God, and her life is fundamentally changed for the better. And isn't that what we all hope for when we come to worship? That our lives will be fundamentally changed for the better? In truth, every Sunday morning we pray for healing in this place of worship. Healing of every kind of infirmity. Healing of body, mind, and spirit.

Over the years some of the suffering folk you have prayed for have indeed been healed, by the grace of God. And others, sadly, have not. Some infirmities and conditions have lingered on for

years-not unlike Paul's thorn in the flesh. And not unlike that cup which Jesus prayed would be removed from him in the Garden of Gethsemane. How well we know that sometimes our prayers are not answered as we had hoped.

Some of you know what it is like to be bent over for eighteen years in persistent pain. Sometimes in the providence of God we are healed. Surely all of us have gone through hard times and have come through it all. All of us want to be whole in body, mind and spirit. But we are sometimes reluctant to pray for healing, as though such a prayer would be an imposition upon God. Sometimes we have theological reservations about the whole idea of God healing a particular person. I remember those heady theological debates in elementary school about Oral Roberts.

When I was serving University Presbyterian Church in Austin during the 1980's, I had a doctoral student in philosophy who was a member of that congregation. One Sunday that student named Richard Baker was asked to lead a church school class for which he was woefully unprepared. This was quite unlike Richard who was an excellent teacher even then and later was an outstanding college teacher himself.

Well, who showed up for that church school class but Dr. Alan Lewis, a brilliant professor of theology at Austin Seminary. Richard was in fact taking a class from Dr. Lewis at the time. So Richard was really in a bind, totally unprepared and facing his theology professor.

Now Dr. Lewis had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Already one cancerous lung had been removed, but he was bravely continuing to teach despite his weakened condition. Richard began by asking the class their opinion of intercessory prayer. (By the way, that is what some teachers do when they have nothing prepared!)

Dr. Lewis raised his hand and said to the entire class: “You know, Richard, I never pray to God to cure my cancer. I pray that God will give me strength to endure it. I also pray that God will give that same strength to my wife and family. But I never pray for physical healing. God’s will is God’s will.”

When Dr. Lewis finished speaking, Richard told me later that he was thinking to himself, “This is beautiful. This is profound. I have absolutely nothing more to say in response.” Thankfully, for Richard, a moment of appreciative silence followed Dr. Lewis’ remarks.

Then a voice rang out from the other side of the classroom. “You’re just wrong about that, Alan, just wrong!” It was Jane Spragens, a beloved pillar of that church. She had taught at the

University of Texas for many years and was the widow of a seminary professor.

After people got over their shock, Jane explained what she meant. “If God can affect you spiritually, then surely God can affect you physically as well. And, Alan, I want you to know that although you may not be praying for God to cure your cancer, I sure am. And I know a lot of other folks here and at the seminary are also praying for you.” That was one of the most amazing moments in a church school class I have ever seen. Where people of great faith and great intelligence expressed deeply divergent views, all in love.

Now here is the rest of the story. Jane Spragens and many others who loved Dr. Lewis prayed for him faithfully, even to the very day he died. And people continued to pray for the Lewis family long after Alan was gone. And that family was helped and encouraged immensely in their grief by a loving seminary and church community.

Friends in Christ, amazing things happen when people gather to worship the living God. A woman bent over for eighteen years encounters Jesus and she walks away freed and healed. Some are upset but most rejoice. Others come to worship and end up in a classroom where strongly held convictions about God are

expressed. And through it all, we continue to pray for each other and love each other.

Now I admired and loved Alan Lewis, one of the best theologians I have ever heard. Nevertheless, I think Jane Spragens was right. If God affects us spiritually, certainly God can affect us physically. Surely God is the God of healing, the Holy One who cares about our body, our mind, and our spirit. And by the grace of God, we are at times healed of our infirmities and our diseases. And for that, we can only thank God with grateful hearts.

It happened long ago. It still happens. And it will happen yet again. People come to worship and they are freed and healed. In body, mind, and spirit. All by the grace of God. That's the wonder of it all. The sheer blessed mystery of it all. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

August 31, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

THE LORD OPENS DOORS

Luke 13: 22-30

I am so grateful to our resident artist Betty Goebille for loaning me one of her paintings. It is entitled “The Blue Door” and in fact it is a painting of a blue door! Come into the pastor’s study and you will see it gracing the wall. It is quiet lovely. Thanks, Betty.

Doors are important. A looking glass becomes a door for Alice to enter Wonderland. A door to a wardrobe allows the Pevensie children to enter the C.S. Lewis world of Narnia. The Reformation began in Sixteenth Century Germany when Martin Luther nails Ninety-five theses on the Wittenburg church door. In 1963 Gov. George Wallace stood in the school door to stop African American students from entering the University of Alabama. Doors are important.

Doors of every size, shape and color are made from all kinds of materials. But all doors have two main functions. Doors open the way and doors block the entrance. A door invites you in. Or a door locks you out. People open doors for you. And people close doors in

your face. In our Gospel lesson, the Lord closes doors and the Lord opens doors. Doors are important indeed.

Passing through many villages in his journey toward Jerusalem, someone asks Jesus a question, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” It’s one of those hypothetical questions that seems innocent enough. But does it reveal a hidden anxiety: “salvation anxiety”? Do people who ask such questions stay awake at night wondering if they are one of the “chosen”? Not sure why this question was asked, but it registers a kind of universal angst.

The way Jesus answers probably increased the anxiety of the questioner. The Lord said, “Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” Here Jesus seems to shut the door on the “many” who will seek entrance, that is, those who want to be saved. The door is narrow and will be closed to those outside who knock and insist “we ate and drank with you”, we heard your teachings. The owner of the house disavows them, causing “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” So the folks who thought they were first will discover that they are last. Left out in the cold. The door slammed in their face.

This is a pretty somber warning, isn’t it? Maybe I should have entitled this sermon “The Lord Closes Doors.” The emphasis here is

upon the doorkeeper, the master of the house, refusing entry to those who fully expected the red-carpet treatment. Instead, they face a “No Entry” sign. So the answer to the question, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” would seem to be, “Yes, only a few.”

Now you may be thinking about now, “Frank, is this one of those scare sermons?” Are you trying to increase the “salvation anxiety” in all our hearts? Let me assure you that I am temperamentally incapable of preaching a “hell fire and damnation sermon”. Having heard hundreds of those kinds of harangues in my youth, no, I will not pass on that kind of abuse.

Who am I to act like I am some kind of “insider” knowing who will be saved? John Calvin, even with his hard doctrine of double predestination, always assumed that everyone in his congregation was of the “elect”. I think that all preachers should assume the same. That is, a “wideness in God’s mercy.”

I prefer to think of Jesus the way the book of Revelation depicts him in chapter three. This is a complementary image of Jesus, the One who stands at the door and knocks on our hearts, yearning to come in and dwell within us. The Christ who seeks our love and our fellowship, offering to open the doors of salvation to us.

Christ knocks on the door of those rather lukewarm Laodicean Christians. He knocks on their door to revive them and renew their faith, hope, and love. His knocking calls for a response. To get up and answer the door if you will. It is a persistent knocking.

Someone is knocking on our door as well. “Behold, I stand at the door, knocking, if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me.” Doors are important and some doors can only be opened from the inside.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus transforms the question, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” Instead of making the door more narrow, like the eye of a needle that a camel cannot pass through, Jesus broadens the doorway. The door becomes incredibly wide, welcoming folks you would never expect. “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.” So now we can talk gladly about how the Lord opens doors indeed.

The Lord opens the door of salvation to people from every nation and tribe and ethnicity. People from the four corners of the globe. A worldwide invitation is extended. “Come one, come all! No matter who you are or where you are from and what you look like or

what you have ever done!” Now the door is open wide and all are welcomed.

The book of Revelation describes the twelve gates to the New Jerusalem as made of peart, the so-called “pearly gates”. But the crucial part about these twelve gates is that they “will never be shut” (Rev. 21:25). And through those gates all the nations will bring their tribute and their homage. The Lord opens the gates of heaven to all the people of the world. These are not border walls. Now the gates “will never be shut”.

Doors are important. Doors block the entrance. And doors swing open to allow folks in. Like many of you, I am concerned about how many doors are being closed these days. Doors closed in our institutions, doors closed to our country, doors closed against our fellow citizens. I am troubled by the increasing hostility and polarization in our nation. Challenging times.

We are all troubled when a young man tries to get into a church and finds the doors locked, this time thankfully. Then he dares to shoot through the stain glass windows at children in worship. Hatred that closed the doors of his heart now erupts in violence to kill and wound innocent people. The doors of our hearts need

always to be opened to the love of God. Open to the Christ who stands at our door knocking persistently.

I am so grateful when doors welcome folks in, when doors gladly accept people “from east and west, and north and south” to sit with them and eat with them. In fellowship, in harmony, and in love. Church buildings will always have doors and I pray to God that they will always be welcoming and inviting. “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” A warm welcome, the hand of fellowship, the cup of cool water, the passing of the peace. Here at the foot of the cross, the welcome mat must always be rolled out.

On this Labor Day Weekend, I want to reiterate what I said in the Witness. Very grateful to Beth Miller for taking me to Rio Tech, a fantastic facility for high school students in our community. Rio Tech opens the doors for many students to have a productive career in various trades. Rio Rancho has literally opened the door to the future for these students.

I believe that one of our callings as followers of Jesus Christ is to open doors for others. Not just in the polite way we hold open doors when coming and going. But in that larger sense of making a way possible for people who perhaps need a hand up, a little

encouragement, some help along the way. Giving people opportunities to grow and mature-that is a Christ-like gesture. As we say sometimes, “Give a fish for but one meal. Teach them to fish for a lifetime.” That’s opening the door to the future. It’s what you do so beautifully with your scholarships for students. Paving the way for them to learn and grow.

So the church of Jesus Christ should be a beacon of light in the world. A light that illumines the path forward for others. An open door of opportunity for those often ignored. A helping hand for those wanting to enter and grow. I hope that our congregation will always be known as “The Church of the Open Door”. The door to grace and mercy. The door for welcome and fellowship. The door of love and acceptance. A door into the life that is life indeed, life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Here may it always be the case that the Lord opens doors. Thanks be to God. Amen.