

Text: Mathew 25: 31-46 (CEB)

Date: 20 Nov 2022, Laity Sunday

Title: The Door to the Church is Not the Door to the Church

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Will you pray with me? Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I have always imagined myself doing that...praying that prayer, ever since I was a kid. Even when Kathleen our previous associate pastor (She may be on with us now!) and Rachel. I think Rachel did the week before last. My father is a pastor and I recall him frequently saying it before his messages.

So this is Laity Sunday as Barb has described. The last Sunday of the Liturgical Year. Pastor Rachel talked it up as a time when the Laity get to show their stuff! I really think that Joe and Rachel have already picked through all the good topics and they are leaving it up to the Laity to figure it out. Kidding! I guess today I prefer NOT to think of it as the last Sunday of the church year. Instead, I like to think of it as the Opening Act for Advent, when we WELCOME the birth of Christ. See what I did there? My message this morning is on welcoming, hospitality.

So what makes me qualified to give this message. Great question. I don't know. I am a PK, a preachers kid. I grew up in the Methodist Church. From a church life perspective, it is all I have really ever known. Does that count for anything? Over and above being a PK, I come from a family of pastors. So my Father is a pastor, his father was pastor. My Uncle, My Other uncle, My cousin, My daughter-in-Law who is tuned in today (and judging me). Her mother is a pastor, heck, even Johannus Theodorus Polhemus who came across from the Netherlands in 1652 was a pastor. So what happened to me?? No idea. I missed the call. A lot of you know that my wife and I are life-long runners. Maybe all those times running in the peaceful woods that little voice in my head that I thought was saying "Faster, Faster" was actually saying "Pastor, Pastor." Sorry God, missed call.

So my message centers on hospitality, welcoming. The scripture was a tough pick. As I was researching, I found that the bible is riddled, riddled with instructional references on the subject. Everywhere...Old testament, New testament, Gospels, Paul's letters and on and on. So how did I pick?

[Slide 2] – Spinning Wheel. I could have chosen a passage with lots of hard names to pronounce but I took pity on Craig/

I said I grew up in the Methodist church. Growing up, I never gave Welcoming a thought. I was already part of the club. Sure, as a kid Dad would let me hand out bulletins, he would let me walk people to their seats, help them get their kids down to the nursery. Was that welcoming? Maybe. Not really on my part. It was more a mechanical act. Something I did with no real thought behind it.

Now, It's absolutely not my intent to lecture anyone on this topic. I often consider myself a failure in this. In fact, a lot of you don't even know who I am...I am one of the dudes and dudettes that sits up in control room and make all the magic happen. Or has to scramble when something goes wrong. I bet you didn't know we have usually around 50 people that tune in on Sunday mornings? "Hi Mom!" My hope instead is to share some thoughts and vignettes based on my own life experiences.

I was career military. Air Force. 25 year career with 13 assignments across the US and overseas. And now, I have been here steadily since I retired 13 years ago. I have seen church welcoming and hospitality from both sides. With this, I propose to you that welcome is not just a single act, not just a "Hey, Welcome!" Not just a handshake. I am glad Joe has been saying go ahead and be brave during worship and reach out It is that...but not just that. I think welcoming is and must be a culture embraced by both the individual and the church.

So, Audience Participation time: Two Questions. Be honest. For those online, go ahead and write in the chat. I am going to review this afterwards.

[SLIDES]

1. How long have you been associated with/attending/visiting this church...2 Hartford Rd
 - a. 1 month or less?
 - b. 1 year or less?
 - c. Somewhere between 1 year and 10 years?
 - d. Forever!!
2. Here is the big one...Do you recall your welcome experience? For those that do, was it:
 - a. Positive? Enhanced my experience/decision to return
 - b. Meh, Nothing stellar. Didn't really influence me a whole lot
 - c. Negative. Made me scratch my head (but came back despite it)

This is good. This is important because we, on the inside, already in the door already part of the club, become blind it. You have heard of nose blindness, right? You get into your car and it smells of that old burrito under the seat but as you drive, you don't notice it anymore. Nose blind!

Back to my story. So after highschool, I went off to college and the Air Force, I kinda drifted off from going to church as many do. I call it my sabbatical. After a few years of being married and in the Air Force, Heidi and I are on our third assignment. We live in a town called Enterprise Alabama. Definitely down South. Home of the Boll Weevil Monument. Heard of it?

[Slide: Monument]. The town built a monument to a bug. No kidding. Right in the middle of main street.

We made a decision to go back to church. There were three United Methodist churches in Enterprise. The first one we visited was because they hosted a 5K road race that we participated in. Heidi won a trophy in the race so we came back then next day for church. Welcome experience? Negative. No parking, barely greeted as we came in, no one really talked to us. But later that day, we got a mug. We didn't go back. Church #2. It was a modern, new church. In fact I recall the grass had not really taken root yet. There was a friendly greeting at the door. I remember recognizing a couple familiar faces from the base. The order of worship and conduct of the service was not really familiar to me. Very contemporary. Again, no one really engaged with us. We didn't feel a connection. We got a mug dropped off at the house later that afternoon. The third church. Very traditional. Just down the street from the monument. A warm welcome at the door. A very familiar worship feel. The pastor had us stand up as newbies (Cringe). Not a real connection but not a bad experience. We got a mug AND a pie that afternoon. We decided that WHEN we wanted to go to church, that would probably be the church we went to. We didn't join and we didn't become active participants. Upon reflection, there was mechanical welcoming/hospitality that seemed to be happening, the individual acts of welcoming were happening, but it didn't hit the spot. It wasn't compelling. We always felt like outsiders looking in.

So fast forward a couple of years. Ashley, our first kid was now with us. I had decided to make a directional change in my AF career to fly fixed wing aircraft instead of helicopters. We found ourselves in Enid Oklahoma for a quick 9-month assignment for me to re-learn which way was up but in a new aircraft. Pilot training is not easy, even for an experienced pilot like me. A lot of study, a lot of long days being grilled on the things we need to know. Before they let us even touch a real aircraft we had a lot of simulator time. We called it Dial-A-Death. The simulator is

designed to catch fire and fall apart on every mission. Star Trek fans? Kobiashi Maru every day. Now every student has an instructor all through it and he or she debriefs us afterwards on how we screwed up. My instructor's name was Andy Klein. He was about my age, we both had a young daughter, we both were highly experienced AF pilots in different aircraft, so other than the fact he was pushing the simulator self-destruct buttons, we were somewhat peers. After one particular day of an excessive amount of simulator crashing and burning and the full debrief of how inadequate I was as a pilot, Andy asks me this question: "Have you found a church home yet?" A church home? I didn't recall ever hearing it put that way. A church home. Nope. No church home. He said, "hey, why don't you come to our church and see what you think." So the next Sunday we did.

We walked in, got the expected welcome at the door. Someone showed us to the nursery to drop off Ashley. When we came back to the sanctuary, the usher took us to a pew and did something interesting. Someone else was already in the pew. The usher said, "Bob (or whatever his name was), this is Mike and Heidi. They are from the base. Bob engaged with us in conversation before the service started. Told us about himself, the church, and its activities. I wondered where Andy was until the Choir processed in. He was in the choir. After the service we picked up Ashley...and she as still smiling, by the way. Terrible Twos and all...On the way out, Bob says "Hey Mike, some of us go out for lunch together after worship. Want to come along?" Holy cow. Talk about making a connection. Talk about feeling welcome, talk about feeling a bit like home. It was more than just the mechanics. I could feel they had embraced a welcoming culture that thrived. It became our church home. Heidi and I both soon joined the choir, despite needing a bucket to carry a tune and we joined that church. It was the church's tradition that toward the end of the service the pastor would ask if there was anyone that want to join the church. We raised our hands and he called us up front. No muss, no fuss, just come one up. His name was Chris Tiger. He said Mike and Heidi, I just have one question for you. As members, will you support this congregation and the united Methodist church with your prayers, your presense, your gifts, your service, and your witness. With that "We Will," we were members of the club! We felt like we were members of the club! By the end of our 9 months in Oklahoma, Heidi and I were even teaching Sunday school.

I mentioned Chris Tiger for a reason. For some reason, I specifically recall two of the messages he preached. One was titled "Riding on the Coat tails of Someone Else's Faith." I felt that was me, a different story for a different time though. The second was "The Door to the Church is NOT the Door to the Church." What was that? REPEAT. I am sure he cited all the bible references I had on my dart board. He talked about the importance of each member of the

church intentionally being attentive to being that giver of hospitality that the bible instructs us to provide. You never know when you are actually going to be the door for someone. It hit me during that message that Andy Klein was the door to that church for us, with that one simple question he asked... "Do you have a church home. Come see mine."

So in preparation for this message, I read a book. Yes, a whole book. Now Heidi is driving back from California right now and probably listening. I am hoping she stayed on the road. I never read books. Well, I read all the Harry Potter books. This book is titled "Becoming a Welcoming Church", by Thom S. Rainer. He is a pastor turned church consultant on the topic. In the book he highlighted the same experiences we had, but he also offered words of caution. He presented a list of barriers to being a welcoming church.

[SLIDE]

A number of them were physical. **Cleanliness.** Who is going to drop their kid off in a dirty nursery? **Parking.** Its human nature, especially in NJ...first come, first serve, I get the closest to the door. No parking spot, no problem, I will make my own! No. We must be deliberate in making it easy for visitors to get here. Old heads...head to the back lot! He says designate some visitor parking. **Facility Layout.** WHERE THE HECK IS THE BATHROOM! Anyone been to the Moorestown UMC? Nice big church, but I gotta tell ya, I got turned around the first time I went there...and I am a pilot! Use maps and signage! What about an **information center?** Have a Welcome kiosk? A manned welcome kiosk? **The Web Page.** Is it accurate? Are the service times correct? Does it have info that a visitor would want and need? I see some of you laughing. Yes, I am the web guy. The here is a big one...**Holy Huddles.** What is a holy huddle? Well, what do you do before an after worship? This group is part of the Womens ministry. The get in a group and talk about who is doing what for the upcoming fundraiser. This group is part of the men's ministry. They huddle up and talk about the upcoming bible study breakfast. That is tough for even a skilled newbie to break into. So what happens. The visitor looks around...huddle there, there and there. I guess we leave now. Again, it is not just about the single act of welcoming. It is about developing an intentional pervasive welcoming culture...just like our signs say out front.

So I guess it is time for me to wrap this up. I have several more stories, both good and bad, to include stories from right here at Medford UMC. I want to leave you with a few challenges. First, if you have been here forever (George). Try to look at your church home with fresh eyes...The eyes of a visitor. Notice those ceiling tiles that are out of place or any other problem, AND do what you can to get it turned into something conducive to a more welcoming culture.

Watch out for those Holy Huddles. Adjust your morning routine so you can be more engaging to help with the visitor experience. For those that are new, feedback is critical. Those that are “in the club” are Nose blind. They need to hear how it is coming in the door. Don’t hold back. Be brutal. I am offering up a tool. If you go to the Sunday Support page, there is a link for a quick opportunity for anyone to offer feedback. Put your name, don’t put your name, it’s up to you. I hope that you do so we, as a welcoming team, can reach out to you to learn more about your perspective. I had a boss who liked to say “Go ahead, tell me if something sucks...but I will also hope you will give me an idea of how to un-suck it!”

We are about to start the season of Advent where God is welcoming us into his salvation through the birth of Christ. We need to do our part. I don’t know where I would be in my faith right now if Andy Klein had not asked me that one simple question: Be the door. An open door. The open door to God’s Love and Christ’s salvation. Amen.