

Sermon 7/15/2018

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The Dangerous Business of Going out Your Door

On the 4th of July, I was at the pool talking to my neighbor Debbie about the sermon I needed to write for today. She asked if there was some theme I should be following. I said, "Yes, I have to write about doors." When she furrowed her brow and looked confused, I responded, "No, not the band The Doors, but doors as a metaphor." Later I discovered a quote by Jim Morrison himself, in which he used doors as a metaphor to explain his songwriting: *"I offer images--I conjure memories of freedom that can still be reached--like the Doors, right? But we can only open the doors--we can't drag people through."* As I Googled more door-as-metaphor quotes, I decided that I would use my favorites of these quotes from literature and elsewhere as jumping-off points to structure my talk today. These quotes are located on an insert in your order of service, and I ask that you read each one aloud with me as I go along. Let's begin with the words which inspired the title of my sermon:

#1: "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, 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."

OK, who knows the author of this little gem? Of course, J.R.R. Tolkien, my daughter, Libby's, favorite author.

As a child, for me, going out my door felt dangerous. It wasn't that I was agoraphobic. I was just keenly aware that when I left the safe physical confines of my home and the protection of my family, I was the only person I could depend on to keep me safe. As a kid, I was painfully shy as well as battle-scarred from the regular bullying I received about my weight. But I was also smart and physically strong and healthy, and my family had

instilled in me a strong moral code and work ethic. These assets were what helped me “keep my feet.”

The year was 1976, and my classmates and I were in the auditorium of Cameron Grade School rehearsing for our 6th grade graduation. Our teacher, Mr. Bayza, asked us to line up by height, tallest to shortest, one line for the girls and one line for the boys. The tallest boy and tallest girl would then walk together to the stage, the second tallest boy and girl would walk together, and so on. Mr. Bayza set us to work lining ourselves up as he went off to take care of other details of the ceremony. It wasn't long before there was a problem. Two girls who were exactly the same height began to argue over who would have to walk to the stage with Timmy H.

Timmy H. was the kind of kid who, today, would have been diagnosed with ADHD. He was fidgety and impulsive, lacked focus and follow-through, and constantly got into trouble. Every year of elementary school that I ended up in a class with him (and there were only two classes per grade in our tiny school, so there was always a 50-50 chance), the teacher always sat me next to Timmy H. so that I could remind him what page we were on, help him find a pencil, and keep him out of trouble. But in addition to his undiagnosed-because-there-wasn't-a-word-for-it ADHD, Timmy H. smelled bad, his clothes were dirty, and he ate his boogers. Having to sit next to him in class all year, just about every other year, was no picnic for me.

Back to the 6th grade graduation rehearsal. The argument between the two girls, who were just a bit taller than I was, over who would be partnered up with Timmy H. for the walk to the stage, was getting louder. “I don't want to walk with him, he stinks!” one said. “Well, I don't want to walk with him, either!” shouted the other. I looked at Timmy and saw his head hung low, as he heard, yet again, that he wasn't good enough. My mom's voice came into my head, “Always treat other people the way you want to be treated.” I didn't want to hear it. Hadn't I sacrificed enough for this kid?

But before I could think about it another second, I stepped forward and said, "I'll walk with Timmy."

Mr. Bayza had heard the girls arguing and had come to find out what was going on when he heard me say I'd walk with Timmy. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Now, here's a girl who CARES about how other people feel." But all I wanted to do was disappear. I wasn't proud of myself. Inside, I was resentful and embarrassed about walking with Timmy. My face was hot and beet red and my eyes stung with tears.

As we lined up to practice the processional to the stage, Timmy H. did not look at me or say thank you. We didn't have to hold hands. We just had to walk side-by-side down the aisle from the back of the auditorium to the stage, and then separate, with Timmy H. taking the steps on the left side of the stage and me taking the steps on the right. Then we had to walk to the small set of bleachers set up at the center of the stage and sit down next to the boy or girl who had walked ahead of us. As I climbed onto the bleachers, I realized that, although I'd be walking to the stage next to Timmy H., a trip that would take maybe 20 seconds, I would be sitting next to someone else for the entire half-hour-long graduation ceremony. And that someone else was Timmy B., the smart, athletic, dark-haired, blue-eyed, clean-smelling boy I'd had a crush on since he moved to our school in second grade. Oh, and one of the two girls who'd made such a scene earlier would be sitting next to Timmy H. for the entire ceremony. I didn't know the word for it then, but can you say "karma"?

But what if my mother hadn't taught me the Golden Rule? What if I hadn't seen her, and other important adults in my life, living the Golden Rule every day? What we teach our kids matters. The values and principles that we uphold here at UCH, instill in our children and youth, and--most importantly--model for them with our own actions are what keep them from being swept off their feet as they undertake the dangerous business of going out their doors.

In his self-help fantasy book *Rise of the Morningstar*, A.J. Darkholme uses the metaphor of a locked door to give his own spin on the Golden Rule:

#2. "Every man walks his own path, and every path has its fair share of locked doors. You never know who holds the key to a door you'll need to open one day, so you best treat people as if they are all keyholders."

Now let's move onto quote #3, which is by Helen Keller:

#3: "When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."

Change is hard. Oh boy, is it ever hard. When that change is the end of a relationship that you have counted on, staked your life and wellbeing to, and defined your very existence by for more than half your life, it can feel soul shattering. When my marriage of 27 years ended four years ago, I felt like my soul was shattering. I can honestly say that if it had not been for the support and love of my mother and the close friends I've made here at UCH, I probably would not be alive today. I could not bear the fact that I was alone and my family was broken. I couldn't take my eyes away from that closed door of what I saw as true happiness, behind which was the intact family unit, love, and stability that I thought I'd always have. These words by Turkish writer and thinker Mehmet Murat ildan sum up how I felt:

#4: "The most beautiful door is the door you feel yourself safe behind it!"

I longed for the *safety* of my marriage more than anything. But my mom and my friends reminded me that I was strong, that I could and would get through the divorce and rebuild my life. They showed me that another door had been opened for me and that I could find happiness again by walking through it.

I believe that we here at UCH are guilty of staring at a closed door of happiness, one that we consider the most beautiful door because we feel safe behind it. That metaphorical door is actually two real doors: the doors of our beloved Clover Lane and Market Street church buildings. Our Board of Trustees has been blunt: “UCH is faced with a grave financial crisis. We have been informed that several candidates for our settled minister position would not consider UCH because of our unstable financial status. UCH is at risk of having to sell one or both of our church buildings. ”

As a result, all of us are being asked to attend Cottage Meetings to be held later this summer. “Cottage meetings are a structured way for members to talk about our identity, purpose, and future. They will enable us to explore and share our thoughts and feelings regarding the role of UCH in our lives.” As a member of this church for over 20 years, I want to remind you that UCH is its people, not its buildings. During times of strife, I have found safety and solace in the people of this church, not in the wood, bricks, and mortar that form the buildings. We can be the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg behind the door of any building, even dare I say one we don’t own, as long as we are all there together.

So now more words of inspiration from Mehmet Murat ildan, who never met an exclamation point he didn’t like:

#5: “If nobody knocks your door, knock your own door! The most precious support for you is the support you give yourself!”

We all navigate much of our daily lives without the physical presence of our peeps, that support system of people we can depend on to help us through a tough situation. That's why one of the most important things we parents teach our children is how to advocate for themselves when we are not around. When a child has autism, this skill is all the more important. My son, Grady, has autism. Communication is difficult for Grady, particularly in stressful situations. When he was four years old, I watched helplessly as he fell off the rope swing in our yard, landing hard on the right side of his back. Through his screams and sobs, Grady not only couldn't TELL me where he hurt, he couldn't even POINT to it. I had to remove his shirt to find the large bump on his broken collarbone.

Next month, Grady will turn 15 and a week later he will start high school. His difficulties with both expressive and receptive communication have lessened, but they're still there. For those of you who know my son, you also know that he is African-American, and he is a big boy. Right now, my biggest worry as Grady's mother is that *when* he is stopped by the police--not *if*, because I know it will eventually happen--the outcome will not be good. That's why I have had my son practice saying, "I am Grady Bechtel and I have autism." I also plan to take him to our township police station and introduce him to some of the officers there. As a young black man, my son is keenly aware of the deadly incidents that have occurred between other young black men and the police. I want Grady to have positive interactions with a few police officers in order to counterbalance his perception that, in his words, "The police hate black people." During our visit to the police station, I will also share information about Grady with the officers there, including our home address, which they can then put in their database and access if--no, when--one of the officers stops a young black man who says, "I am Grady Bechtel and I have autism."

Self-advocacy is a vital skill all of us need to master. We need to be able to knock on our own doors if no one else will, and know how to be our own biggest supporter. For it is only when we can do that for ourselves

that we are able to do it for other people. Which leads me to my final quote for today by therapist and minister Craig D. Lounsbrough:

#6: "A cause that only serves me is much like a door on the edge of a cliff, it doesn't open to anywhere good."

I was diagnosed with depression more than 15 years ago and have been on antidepressants ever since. But the medicine doesn't always work and sometimes an event in my life will trigger a depressive episode, such as the end of a relationship. When I am depressed, my brain is my worst enemy. It tells me I'm worthless and an imposter, that no one would miss me if I were gone. During these low points, my urge is to withdraw from others, to avoid social situations, to focus on only me. Basically, to stay inside my own head, which is the most dangerous place I could possibly be.

This past year, I discovered that the very best thing I can do for myself when I am depressed is to do something helpful for someone else. For example, last fall I agreed to mentor a new teacher at my school. My impulse was to say no thanks when asked to take on this added work that offered no pay. But the extra work kept my mind busy and knowing that I was helping someone else learn the ropes and be successful in her new job made me feel good. This combination of occupying my mind with complex work PLUS doing something that benefited someone other than myself helped me safely navigate a depressive period and might have even shortened its duration.

So I have been volunteering at church more in the past year, including agreeing to lead this service, and I will continue to volunteer. Giving my time and talents to UCH not only serves me by improving my mental health, but it also supports the health and vitality of this church. I encourage you to do the same. May it be so. Blessed Be and Amen.