

“A Lesson from a Sticking Door”

Sermon: Year C, Epiphany 6

Texts: Luke 6:17–26, Psalm 1

Preached: February 17, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who fills the hungry with good things. AMEN

Sometimes we are reminded of what’s important by the strangest things. For me this week, it was the sticking door to the church that’s in the courtyard. We’ve been having problems for some time with the door sticking just shy of clicking shut, so often we discover that it’s not really locked. So in the past few weeks we’ve had guests we didn’t expect. A couple of weeks ago, a group of us were gathered one bitter cold evening in Fellowship Hall when someone reported that there was a man they didn’t know who was in the church office. I went to investigate, and found one of our homeless neighbors whom we had helped before. He struggles with schizophrenia, and had ended up with nowhere to stay, and was trying to get enough money to secure a bed in a flophouse in Roger’s Park. Week before last, Jimmy was surprised one afternoon by a homeless woman who was trying to get in out of the cold and had found the door open. He spent some time talking to her and invited her to stay for a little while until she could get warm. And then this past week, I got a call from Jane, our office administrator. She and Joe Simchak were in the church office when they heard someone in the building. There was a man who has been our guest at Café Immanuel. He had found the door open, and was looking for a place to wash himself a bit. He also had a couple of bags of frozen shrimp, and was hoping to find a way to cook them. Joe extended hospitality to him, and put a pot of water on to boil.

The next morning, Jane texted me when I was on my way in to the office, telling me how upset she had been by that incident, and asking if we could talk about it when I got there. I interpreted her distress as being triggered by fright, and I understood that. It’s scary to be in this building all alone, and the thought that strangers could be wandering the halls is unnerving. I texted back that the key thing was to make progress with finding a door company to come out and replace the door. When I got there, Jane and Joe were at their desks. I pulled up a chair and said, “Let’s talk about this,” expecting Jane to pressure us to make the building more secure, and a discussion of doors, locks, and video cameras. She began the conversation, though, by saying, “This incident is very emotional for me. I’m not sure how to respond. I’ve never worked anywhere where the question of who came in the building was a moral one.” That drew me up short. You see, the main issues Jane was struggling with were less the ones about security, though those questions are very real and important, and need to be addressed. The main issue she was struggling with was the fundamental question of, how do we respond when someone in need comes to our sticky door?

The three of us sat and wrestled with the response. No, we cannot have a completely open door that anyone can come through at any time. That is not wise. But neither can we be comfortable with the thought of turning people out into life-threatening cold when all they are seeking is warmth, especially when we have previously welcomed those people through that same door as guests. We talked for some time, weighing the competing needs, the various responses. We talked about the importance of boundaries, the need to recognize what we can and cannot offer, ways in which we could give people with needs who come to the door the information to find the resources that are available to them elsewhere. Joe recounted his whole interaction with the man who had come in on Wednesday, whom he treated with respect, meeting his immediate needs, and then he said something very important. He said, “And you know what? It felt really good.”

And echoing in my head were the words of the Letter of James that we heard recently in worship: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” And the words of 1 John: “If anyone has the world’s goods, and sees a brother or sister in need, yet closes their heart against them, how does God’s love abide in them?”

Then we’re confronted by those words of Jesus we just heard from the Gospel of Luke: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” There is an interesting difference between the words of the Beatitudes in Matthew, the ones we’re used to hearing, and the way Luke reports them. In Matthew, the Beatitudes are spiritualized:

“Blessed are the poor *in spirit*,” and “Blessed are you who hunger and thirst *after righteousness*.” But in Luke’s gospel, these words of Jesus are not aimed at improving our spiritual health. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus makes the bald assertion that it is the actual poor and the actual hungry who are blessed by God, and in doing so, he shows us God’s own priorities. Throughout scripture, care for the poor, the hungry, the immigrant and stranger, those who weep, those are shown as God’s priorities. And a righteous person, in the words of Psalm 1, is one who has received instruction from God, and who responds by doing the things God loves. God loves the poor.

The path to righteousness, the road to true faith, lies in aligning ourselves with God’s priorities. It’s not good enough to say, “That’s really terrible that you’re in this situation.” Nor can we simply improve our locks and hide behind our fortified doors. We have sisters and brothers walking through a door that we proclaim to be one of welcome, and we need to find ways in which we can help meet their needs. We have made terrific steps in meeting our sisters’ and brothers’ needs for warmth, through our quilting ministry, and feeding hungry stomachs through Café Immanuel, through the Farmers Market, through food drives, through gifts to hunger organizations. Those are all good and faithful responses to the needs we see around us. Thanks be to God! Yet still our sisters and brothers wander homeless, seeking warmth and hospitality. We cannot fulfill every need. But are there other things we are being called to, deeper commitments we can make to serving those in need?

We have been asked as a congregation to consider opening our doors one afternoon a week throughout the winter to serve as a warming center for our neighbors. A task force is examining whether we might be able to respond to this call. Various congregations open their doors once a week for a few hours in the afternoon so people can come in from the cold, get a hot cup of coffee or chocolate, watch a movie on TV, maybe play some games, maybe stretch out on a pad to get much-needed rest. We can find the space, I’m sure. But to make this commitment of hospitality, we will also need volunteers to come and staff the center. Is God calling you to be the face of welcome to meet this need? We may not be able to pull this together before the winter is past...but could we build toward committing ourselves for the next winter? We also will be having a conversation with Connections for the Homeless to see whether our unused, locked spaces lying fallow downstairs might lend themselves to administrative office use, so that greater numbers of homeless people can be served in Evanston. Working toward the root of the problem for comprehensive solutions is also a means of providing hospitality.

In the midst of the wealth that we live with, there are still the poor, still the hungry, still the cold, still the weeping and sad. Jesus cries woe to us if we do not share what we have been given, if we do not shelter those who need shelter. Woe to us if we close our doors against the need. Does this mean we shouldn’t have a safe and secure building? By no means. As much as possible, our actions need to be done strategically, wisely, in ways that are mutually beneficial. But we cannot let safety, or building maintenance, or any other solvable issue, keep us from responding with generous hearts, even if that means coloring outside the lines. Maybe our building as it is now configured isn’t well suited to meeting these needs. But are there choices we could make that could give us useful space to minister in the ways we’re being called to do?

Yes, we are small. No, our resources are not unlimited. But it may just be that if we go out onto the water and cast our nets wide, we may find them full. As many of you know, I did my parish internship at Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, DC. Luther Place was a small congregation, with attendance about like our own. They had been a “white-glove” kind of church, made up of well-educated, wealthy Washingtonians, the kind of church with monogrammed china and three sets of sterling tea service. But they had become discouraged, bewildered at the changes that had taken place around them following the riots that resulted after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. People had stopped coming to worship. Resources were down. But that little congregation decided to look outward, and saw on their doorsteps homeless women, and discovered that, even though there were shelters for homeless men, there were none for women. So this little congregation decided to do something about that. They gave sacrificially to build an additional floor on their parish building to create an emergency night shelter. The members of the congregation took turns staffing the shelter. They partnered with a Jewish congregation and another Christian congregation, and secured money to build a complex on property they owned across the street to provide transitional housing for women seeking to leave homelessness, and it was funded in part by a mixed-income rental apartment building that was part of the complex. Today, it is a thriving operation, and the congregation is thriving as well, because they took a risk to show hospitality to those most in need of it.

The fact is, it *does* feel good to respond to those in need. Our sticky door really *is* meant to open. So here’s the question I leave you to ponder: How is the Spirit calling us, how is the Spirit calling you, to answer the door? AMEN