

“Open the Doors Wider!”

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November 17, 2013

John 6: 1-14

I have been thinking about the power of doors ever since the morning October 7<sup>th</sup>. That is the day I accidentally got trapped in our bedroom thanks to a 71 year old doorknob that finally quit and a door that wouldn't budge. Beth got up earlier than me on October 7<sup>th</sup>, and very politely shut the bedroom door to keep the cats out. When she tried to come back in, she discovered that the doorknob was stuck. Like, stuck-stuck. So stuck that when she managed to take off the doorknob, the internal lock mechanism was still engaged, and well, stuck shut. The door hinges were, of course, on my side of the door, and were, of course, impossible to take off, being as old and solid as the door they were attached to.

We took to the internet looking for solutions while I tried not to think about that extra glass of water I drank right before bedtime. The internet was no help. Nothing we tried was working. I began envisioning tying the bed sheets together and shimmying two stories down the side of the house, with the dog strapped to my back - a much less romantic version of Rapunzel. I prayed. I wined. I was trapped inside my bedroom and I felt that called for the highest amount of drama I could muster that early in the morning. On the other, more practical side of the door, Beth consulted over the phone with MacGyver, also known as my future-father-in-law Jim, but none of his ideas worked. Thirty minutes later MacGyver made a house call, tried several more attempts, and finally saved the day by kicking in the door, ninja style. It pays to have a black belt in the family. We haven't fixed the door, wary of a new doorknob now that we know the trouble they can cause. And so, ever since the stressful morning of October 7<sup>th</sup>, I have been thinking about the power of doors.

Doors are everywhere. They are our way into and out of homes and offices, rooms and cars, schools and stores. They are that transitional space from one place to the next. And they can make us feel safe. Doors with locks make sure that only people with the right keys can come inside, which

protects us from things and people we don't want to enter. Anytime we close a door we might ask ourselves: are you keeping yourself in, or are you keeping someone else out?

With all these thoughts on doors rambling through my head, it was inevitable that I started thinking about South Church, and what doors we have open and what doors we might not even realize are closed. I think in a church, doors can be really helpful because once you open one and come in, you are a part of this place. You feel the welcome. You make friends. You start to feel at home. You see yourself on the other side of the door. One of the things I love about South Church is we try to open our doors wide, so that there is as little obstacle as possible for anyone who wants to come in. It is one of the things we hear over and over again from people who love this church—our warm welcome, our hospitality, our open doors. And we know this – it is a gift.

When we welcome new members to South Church, as they join, we always say “now that you're here, this place will never be the same again.” It's a message I take to heart, because it means that the welcome is not over. The real work of being community together is about to begin. It is the reminder that when we invite people in, they are not the only ones who are transformed by being here—we, whether we have been here two years or twenty years, become transformed by knowing new people and letting them into the heart and soul of this church. The whole community alters as relationships are formed and passions emerge for the first time. Dynamics change when we listen to perspectives that are different from our own, hear experiences and stories that are sometimes similar but just as often dissimilar to ours. When we welcome people and say, “This place will never be the same again” it is a reminder to ourselves that we are the ones who have to make room. We have to share what we have experienced, and invite others in to have their own experience of South Church.

Here is a different way to think about it: when you invite a guest over for dinner, you are saying “Welcome to my house.” You might ask them to take their shoes off at the door because that is what you do. You might say grace before the meal, because that is what you always do in your house. You want them to eat your food and you hope they will enjoy it and you hope they will be comfortable and

welcome, but at the end of the day, it is still your house. Your guests will leave.

It would be **a lot** different if you invited that same guest to your home, but instead of dinner, you asked them to move in with you. What if they showed up on your doorstep with dessert and three suitcases? Everything in your life would shift—your daily life would alter, your home would become their home, and you would both be transformed by the experience of living together, of knowing each other day in and day out, on good days and on bad days.” The differences between the two scenarios are so radically different that it is difficult to even compare them. Serving dinner is easy, sharing your life with someone is a lot more work. More work, and more gratifying. Reward and challenge, hand in hand.

The story of Jesus feeding that huge crowd with just fives loaves of bread and two fish is a story about opening the doors wider. The miracle everyone talks about in that story is how Jesus fed so many people with so little food. But there is another miracle that is often overlooked. That miracle is that the disciples didn't walk out on Jesus when they saw that he was planning to give away their lunch to thousands of people. I can only imagine being one of the disciples and thinking, “Oh good, there is enough bread and fish for the twelve of us. We'll have a nice lunch.” I imagine being hungry, and then I imagine the internal panic that would occur when Jesus announces that he plans to share our lunch with everyone who has gathered. The scripture doesn't show much of a reaction from the disciples but I can picture someone saying, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!?! THAT'S OUR LUNCH!!! I'M HUNGRY!” and another disciple just leaving because he didn't believe there would be enough, desperate to find food from somewhere else, hiding it from Jesus lest he try to give that away as well.

After all, those disciples deserved their lunch. They were doing their disciple-duties and followed Jesus around, up and down the mountainside that day. They even happily shared Jesus with those gathered, allowing others to get close and listen in, not trying to keep his wisdom for themselves. But then they also had to share their lunch? That's asking a lot. The faith in this story comes from the disciples who may have quietly protested, but who shared their food. It was an act of faith, a sign in

their trust in Jesus, that they broke the bread, and passed it around and made sure everyone got a hearty piece of fish to eat.

They opened the door wider that day, allowing space for others. It was more than lunch. They allowed others to experience Jesus' ministry and together the whole crowd, including the disciples, were transformed by their faith.

Opening doors take courage and bravery. It requires faith, in God and in each other. Opening doors means letting go of control enough to let someone else in. That is why the faith part is so crucial—we have to remember that even as we let go, God is still present and God is still guiding everything around us. When we say, “This place will never be the same again” we are really saying that **we will never be the same again**. We have to be willing to let that happen. This might mean, on its more challenging days, giving up something of our own for someone else. It might mean not knowing how things will fit together, or what the final result will be.

It can be hard to step back and open ourselves up. It is the work of faith and it is what God calls us to do, but it is still a challenge at times. It is tempting to take a door that has swung open too widely, too quickly and when things start to feel out of our control, gently start to shut it, just a little bit. *Creeeaaak*. When we feel like we can only take so much change and we are already tired, *creeeaaak* goes the door, back in a few more inches. But trust me, you don't want to shut a door and discover it is broken and that you are stuck on the wrong side of it. It's not a pleasant place to be.

Saying yes to open doors is saying yes to community. It is saying yes to our neighbors, including the ones we haven't met yet. It is saying yes to a life of discipleship, which is a life lived together, where we invite people for a meal and hope they stay for much more. It is making room to move to someplace different than where we have already been, someplace unknown. Saying yes to open doors is to treat each day as an opportunity and where in some ways we are all new members, journeying together and transforming, never quite the same as we once were at the start. Welcome, friends, to this new place. Welcome.