“Gathered at the Door”

5th Sunday after Epiphany, Feb. 4, 2018, Year B

Mark 1:29-39

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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*29As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. 30Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. 31So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. 32That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. 33The whole town gathered at the door, 34and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.*

*35Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. 36Simon and his companions went to look for him, 37and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” 38Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” 39So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (Mark 1:29-39)*

Recently we’ve had a bit of trouble with the boys on bikes who hang around in back of the church. We know one of their number started the fire that damaged our church in December. We hadn’t seen them since the fire, but now that the debris has been cleared away, they have returned (minus their friend who is in juvenile custody). Many of us have asked them politely, and not so politely, not to hang around in back anymore. We are understandably afraid that they’ll start another fire. This makes perfect sense to us, but teenage brains work differently from adults’ brains. Will there ever be a time when we do understand each other? If past history is a guide, probably not. A 60-something man I know who grew up here said he and his friends used to smoke right outside of my office, so we have a long and not-so-illustrious history of hosting errant teenage boys.

But last week, relations with the boys turned serious. There was a verbal altercation between one of our members and one of the boys. When asked to move along, he became very disrespectful and belligerent. The incident was reported to the Trustees and we had a meeting on what to do about the situation.

Sadly, we came to the conclusion that the only recourse we had was to call the police whenever the boys showed up. We didn’t want to risk escalating any more conflicts and we certainly didn’t want our church burned or vandalized again. We discussed posting “No Trespassing” signs. No one felt good about it, but we couldn’t figure out a better way.

After a fitful night, I awoke in the morning with a startling thought. Our church has been hoping and praying for a youth group. Here were a dozen boys gathering around our back door every day after school with nothing to do. Perhaps all that was needed was for someone to go out there and talk to them, ask them why they liked this spot, and ask what kind of place they would like to go if they had a choice?

I had visions of making friends instead of enemies. I thought of swapping stories with them – I’d tell one and then ask them to tell me one. I thought of a bike-a-thon fundraiser where their bikes would be welcomed instead of dreaded. I thought of inviting them to church in the afternoon after school and possibly on Sundays for a half hour of teen-centered ministry. All of these dreams and plans poured through me, and I felt elated and challenged to attempt to make this happen.

It turns out another person at our meeting felt the same way. He emailed me that morning and expressed the very concerns I had about turning these boys away. We proclaim with signs on the front lawn that say “All are welcome” but at the back door we put up signs that say “No Trespassing.” For us, it was a crossroads moment, a Holy Spirit moment. Who *are* we as a church and what *do* we really stand for?

Jesus gives us a clear view of what church is all about. The setting of Mark’s story is sundown on the Sabbath, the time when prohibitions against doing work were lifted and normal activities could resume. Simon and Andrew invite Jesus into their home, where they discover Simon’s mother-in-law is ill. Jesus takes her hand, helps her up, and cures her of her illness. That same night, all the sick and suffering people in town gather around Simon’s door and stand in line to seek healing from Jesus. He does healing after healing after healing. He probably fell asleep exhausted.

The next morning, before sunrise, before anyone could make demands of him, he slips out of the house and finds a quiet spot to pray. Of course, Simon and the others discover his meditation spot and urge him to return. “Everyone is looking for you!” they say. “Let’s go back so you can touch them.” Jesus thought differently. Instead of returning to the scene of last night’s healings, Jesus says, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

People had gathered around Simon’s door, pressed together, putting up with close quarters because they knew Jesus had something they needed. He didn’t turn them away. Instead he patiently saw each one, felt their pain, and released it from them. That door stayed open for as long as it took for every person to stand in the presence of Jesus and receive his blessing.

Of course, word spread about what one could get through that open door, so more and more people came the next day and lined up again. But Jesus realized he could not just stay in one place and wait for people to come to him. He didn’t intend to set up shop in only one town and dispense healings on demand. No, he knew he must travel on, and so he gathered his disciples and they made plans for the next stop on the journey.

Sometimes we see things from our own point of view and we forget to ask God to help us see a bigger picture. If Jesus did stay in that one town, how would the whole region of Israel get to know him and what his true message was? How would he meet people of other races and religions and be able to tell them about the wide open door to the kingdom of God? How would he preach on hillsides, from boats, at dinner tables and roadside rest stops, and from synagogues and temples? His ministry adventures would not have been so diverse and fruitful if he stayed in one place.

If the church has only one vision of and for itself, how will we survive? It is comfortable inside with all the familiar faces and rituals; the stained glass and colored cloths; the communion ware, baptismal font, and memorial plaques in the pews. This is our sacred space and we claim it and treat it that way, with respect and deference. This is church according to *our* vision.

But Jesus’ vision for the church was quite different. Jesus’ vision was to go beyond welcome, to break down barriers, to even risk getting hurt in the process of creating church. The people who gathered around Simon’s door came at night; so do the boys on bikes come gather here in the evening around our back door.

Those of us of a certain age look tiredly upon the challenge to turn our relationship around. We’ve been there, done that, and now our children are grown and gone with children of their own.

But there may be one or two among us who may be up for this experiment. Not too long ago, a few of us met to try to form an after-school arts program for Saugus kids with nothing else to do after school. We thought it was a great idea, but it never got much traction. In reflecting upon this, I wonder if it was because it was *our* idea and not God’s. We thought we had a brilliant solution to the problem of bored teenagers. But now I think it was because *we adults* liked the idea of a low-impact, creative outlet for kids, and I think we forgot to pray to God for God’s approval.

Now, this group of kids has dropped in our laps. Were they sent from God? Maybe. There just seem to be too many similarities between them and those who crowded around the door of Simon’s house to see Jesus. If we say we are a “healing church,” perhaps this is one way to show it.

Don’t get me wrong. This situation poses an enormous personal challenge to me. I don’t know if I have the right stuff to even *attempt* such an audacious undertaking. I never raised a teenage boy, so what do I know? But maybe we can find a couple of people who have, and they can help guide us and teach us how it’s done.

Jesus desired for his disciples to, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” He didn’t say, “Stay here and see if anyone comes knocking at the door.” But, it seems we are fortunate enough to have this group do just that. The life of a Jesus-follower is hard, but here in this church named after him – the United Church of Christ – shouldn’t we at least *open* the door to those *do* come knocking? May we do so with the help of God and God’s approval. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol.4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 332-337.

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).