

“Gathered at the Door”

Sunset couldn't come fast enough. Not on this Sabbath day. It began with the 6 a.m. Synagogue service, which is what caused all the impatience in the whole town. Everyone who saw the new Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, that morning, was in awe of his way of teaching truth, and with authority. Everyone who decided to sleep in or feign a little sick tummy was regretting it, because not only did they miss the new authoritative teaching, they missed the casting out of the demon and the healing of the unfortunate man it had possessed.

They passed the hours, after the synagogue service was abruptly dismissed because how do you follow a demon-cleansing, by comparing notes over the fence with neighbors. The noon dinner had much less of the bickering among the children and the gossiping about who wore what to synagogue that morning. There was real focus: how can we get to Jesus? Word spread that he was staying at Simon and Andrew's house, two of his four new recruits.

Even the afternoon naps were restless, because they had to wait until 6 p.m., waiting for the first three stars to be visible in the evening sky, and then the Sabbath would be officially ended, and they could go find Jesus at Simon and Andrew's house. They didn't plan on all going together, but so it turned out, the

whole town marching west down Main Street and then two streets north up Desert Road where, in the small house in middle of the block, they hoped to find Jesus.

Earlier that day Jesus did in fact arrive at the home of his friends. But as he arrived Jesus heard the commotion in the other room. Simon's wife was pleading with him, "My mother never made it to the synagogue today, Simon. Her fever got so much worse. I don't know what is left to do for her. Please, Simon, ask your new Teacher to look at her. It can't hurt, and it might help."

Simon didn't have to ask twice. It was Jesus' nature, after all, even though he was beset by hunger and a feeling like he really needed a power nap after his confrontation with the Evil One. Jesus went into the 'mother-in-law' room, just off the kitchen, and he saw the fevered woman there, tossing, turning, dripping with sweat but complaining of being really, really cold. "More blankets," she pleaded.

Jesus looked at her. And while he could have just said the word, 'rise', he did something even better. He took her by the hand, and he helped her up. 'She is risen'. Jesus saw the foreshadowing of the event still three years away, but no one else did. Except perhaps for the mother-in-law.

She did rise. Her fever was gone. She looked at her daughter and son-in-law after her eyes away from the inviting face of Jesus, after he released her hand from his gentle touch, as gentle as a carpenter's hands can be anyway. And then she realized who this was, this Rabbi. She did what came naturally to her. She served Jesus.

The word for 'wait on them' (Mark 1:31) is the same word for 'deacon'. The healed woman was the first Deacon called to serve Jesus. This story is badly misunderstood when it is criticized for imposing gender expectations on the woman. This isn't a story about a just-healed woman being expected to cook dinner for her family. No, it is a story about a just-healed woman realizing that she had been touched by Jesus, raised up to life, filled with gratitude.

That's not a bad lesson for us, is it? Jesus, who heals us, some of us physically, but who heals all who will receive him spiritually, by washing away our sins, this Jesus deserves to be served. Serve the Servant as the Servant has served you. Why do you serve in Christ's Church, why do you give of your precious time and your hard-earned money to a mostly volunteer organization which seems to barely make a dent in society's problems? Because Jesus touched you and helped you up when life laid you low. And because one day Jesus will touch your cold

hand and make it new and warm when death lays you low. Be a 'serving-deacon', you healed people.

Well, by the time all of that commotion was over, and they finally finished the noon meal, the sun was setting. And then they heard what sounded like a small army marching down Desert Road toward their multi-family home. First one, then two families, with sick people in tow. And soon enough the doorway was jammed with bodies, the paralyzed, the fevered, the arthritic hands, the aching backs, the migraine sufferers, the possessed, the whole town, gathered there at the door.

So, Jesus went to work. Again. Still. You see whether you are in the church or in the house, when Jesus is there the door is always open. There are no interviews about anyone's theological views; no catechism quizzes; no judging of social standing or who they love or don't love. Nope. When you are in the room with Jesus you need to leave the door open to whomever hears the call to come to Jesus.

What do you suppose that means for us, Hope Church, in 2021? What does it mean to keep the door open in a COVID-possessed place and time? I mean,

let's face the truth, the whole town is not gathering at our door, nor at all the doors of all of the churches in the whole city.

Perhaps the challenge and the opportunity of 2021, is to re-imagine the 'door'. Yes, we need to care with the love of Jesus for all those who dwell inside our 'house', our members and friends and their families. Certainly, we care for those who have entered the door, offering the healing touch of Jesus to them.

But it also means, I believe, trying to understand where the 'whole town' now gathers when they finally figure out that Jesus is in town. How do we bring Jesus to that door? What do you think that door looks like? Where is it? How do we open it so Jesus can meet them there?

When society challenges the relevance of the Church of Jesus Christ by mocking, or worse, ignoring us, how do we respond? Do we close the door and lock it tight? Or do we look for new doors, praying for the keys which will open them to all who want to come to Jesus?

Jesus, who maybe caught a few hours of sleep that night, while it was still dark, rouses himself at 4:30 a.m. Jesus sneaks out the back door so he can avoid those who still await him, sleeping at the front door. He heads out for the most important conversation of the day, of every day. He goes to a quiet place where

all distractions are removed, and he talks to his Father, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be God's Name.

When Simon and his buddies wake up, with that feeling of rest you get only after the good exhaustion of a hard day's work, Jesus is missing. They start hunting for him (that's the word, "hunting"), and when they finally find him, they are exasperated. What kind of a folk hero is this? What kind of king-in-waiting runs away from his adoring people? "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus is not captured by any dream of fame or recognition. He has zero Friends on Facebook and zero followers in Twitter, no one looks at his Instagram or Tik Tok accounts. "You could be famous, Jesus! You could be President, or at least Mayor of the town."

But Jesus knows his mission statement by heart. "My preaching and healing are for everyone. We need to find new doors in new synagogues and houses. We need to find doors that open into fitness centers, factories, farms, into hospitals and schools and restaurants. There are so many people with whom we need to share the good news, those I have come to help up, raise."

So, they leave. The crowd gathered at the door goes home. They haven't all been physically healed, not everyone ever is, but they all found Jesus, they met the one in whom they can find hope.



Meanwhile, mother-in-law (don't you wish Mark had told us her name?), she goes into the town, offering Jesus' servant, visiting the sick and distressed. She has a whole new retirement career, a reason to get up every day, caring for her neighbors, healing God's children. What a way to 'finish well' her journey home. Carrying on the work of Jesus to all who heard his call.

What are your plans for finishing well? To whom is Jesus sending you, servant?

Take this thought with you today:

Jesus raises up servants in the Church to open doors to all who seek his healing presence, and to go out through church doors to share the Good News.

This is Genuine Hospitality: to find the new doorways where people gather, walking through those doors, offering not a word of judgment but a healing touch of love which raises them up, in Jesus' name.

You see, the whole town of Sheboygan County will gather at the door in search of him once they learn Jesus is in town.

Who will help us find the new doorway into the community?

Who will insist that the door remain open to all without judgment?

Who will go to those gathered at the door, offering an invitation to the Table, where we meet Jesus?

