

Knock, Knock
July 24, 2016
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer Gingras

Luke 11:1-13, Colossians 2:6-19

Suppose you have a friend who surprises you at home on a Thursday night. He says to you at the door, *"Friend, let me in that I may watch Netflix with you, for my internet signal is weak because my home is a Pokestop and everyone around me is using up my bandwidth, and I have one episode left to watch of the new season of Orange in the New Black."*

You turn around and glance at your living room and at yourself and see that you haven't cleaned. Newspapers and food wrappers are strewn about, your duffel bag lies unpacked from a recent trip, and you are in your oldest pajamas, the ones with the hole in the left knee.

You respond, *"Find another place to watch netflix, for I am ready for bed, my bandwidth is low and my house is a mess. I cannot possibly open the door for you."*

What a nightmare. How do you deal with the shame of dirty laundry on the floor or the bag of Doritos that have spilled onto the coffee table? How do you deal with yourself in old, torn pajamas and hair that is out of control?

Imagine the shame that you feel, pulled between the need to open the door for a friend and disgust over the temporary condition in which you live. How do you reconcile the two tensions? The man in today's parable might have felt a similar pull when he refused to open the door at midnight. First-century society demanded hospitality, and when anyone was passing by and needed a place to stay for the night, it was considered shameful to refuse.

I'm sure there were legitimate reasons for not wanting to open the door. The children were in bed and he didn't want to wake them up. In a one-room Palestinian home of the time, it was even common for animals such as sheep and goats to be kept inside overnight. Can you imagine the racket had opened the door?

Not only would the kids be crying at this midnight interruption, but the animals might even begin roaming around the house making sounds of their own. How

long would it have taken for this man to get himself, his wife, his children, and his animals back to sleep?

Last week our Senior PF youth group travelled to Henderson Settlements, a remote area of Appalachia on the Kentucky/Tennessee border. We were there to work on distressed housing, in an area where the population is 100% white and average annual income for a family is around \$13,000. If you remember the famous American family feud of the Hatfields and McCoys¹... well, the people we served were their descendants... and proud of it.

My work team was tasked with demolishing, then rebuilding, a bedroom floor that was sinking into the mud. Before we arrived on site the first day, our friends at the Settlements tried to joke that the homeowner's best hope was to take a lit match to the house. It has been my experience that some folks who work in the non-profit sector use a kind of dark humor so that their hearts are not broken from the emotional strain of their work.

But when we rolled up on the site, I understood what they might have meant. Garbage and trash were strewn about the front patch of mud and weeds that resembled a lawn. We had to step over old rusted tools embedded in the clay ground to climb the rickety front stairs. The porch held two swings piled high with broken small appliances, empty soda cans and ashtrays on top of old toys crusty with dirt. Three flea-bitten small dogs yipped a warning from the of an old broken office chair.

On my way to the front door, thoughts ran through my mind like *"Stop judging! You don't even know their story! Pretend like this is normal! Don't let these kids see how disgusted you feel right now!"*

When I knocked on the door we met Shonda, the homeowner. Her husband, Bobby Senior, was a long haul coal truck driver and was away on a run to West Virginia. Her 17 year old daughter had just graduated valedictorian from the regional high school a year early because she skipped a grade (it was her room that we were fixing). Also in the home was their 12 year old son Bobby Junior, who became our shadow, hovering and showing off on his motorbike as we worked.

I was glad that that I didn't notice that first day the bumper sticker on their fridge that said "Send Obama Back to Kenya" or the Confederate flag rolled up on the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hatfield%E2%80%93McCoy_feud

back porch... I may have packed up my tool box then and there and asked for a different assignment. It would have been a very easy thing for me, an Ivy League trained East Coast progressive, to judge her a hillbilly racist and turn away.

When I read this Sunday's passage, it became clear that had I done that – had we walked off the job – it wouldn't really be because I judged her, her family and her living conditions. No, my flight response would REALLY be based in fear. It's scary sometimes to encounter someone so different from most people I know: socially, economically, and politically. What if the truth about our differences came out? How would she react? What would the PF'ers do?

If we had walked off the job that first day, we would have missed finding out about the person she really was, just a stay at home mom who watched too much news, and was really scared. Shonda did want the best for her family but wasn't at all sure how to provide it. Perhaps if she did not live in a 100% white county, she would have believed much better things about people of color, and not just what her coal mining daddy taught her.

Hear me... I'm not trying to condone her beliefs at all. It's just that if I missed out on making that connection with her, there would be no chance of ever learning why she feels the ways she does about the world. It's nearly impossible to build a bridge of understanding if we refuse to hear one another. And we would have completely missed the chance to meet her fear with Christ's love.

There is a lot of hate, mistrust and anger in the world today and it can be really difficult to know how to respond – especially when it comes to conversations with folks we personally know. Terror attacks, riots, mass shootings, corruption, famine and political infighting have been a nightmare, and it's causing all of us to react in a similar way... with a lot of fear. We're told the world is a scary place, and that's not too hard to believe. The fear just about defines us.

Our 24/7 form of news coverage leads to legitimate worries, which carries over to pundits tossing out some to outrageous statements, which results in furious debate, which only causes a hardening of positions and this dualistic righteousness where it's easier to call each other names than speak respectfully. And when we attack each other, the energy of the centrifuge seems to spin us farther and farther apart. It becomes harder to work with those whom we disagree, we get stuck, and community pays the price.

The truth is that when encountering the things that divide us, each and every person is presented with two options. We can choose construction, or we can

choose destruction. We can build a bridge or tear it down. We can the door, or we can deadbolt it, draw the shades and turn the lights off.

Sometimes we can be so full of shame and fear that we won't respond to someone knocking on the door. We don't want anyone to know the deep, dark, awful mess that we carry. We can't risk being vulnerable. We say to ourselves, "They don't want to know that," or "They wouldn't like me too much if they knew," or even "I don't want to tell, because then I would be responsible."

Today's parable suggests to us that sometimes it is God knocking on our door, always there ready to listen, like the friend who cares enough to stand enter our home even when we are ashamed, or full of ourselves, or too busy watching television to get up and greet them properly. God is like one who knows what kind of mess we are in, but continues to wait shamelessly and persistently for us to open up, knowing that speaking the words and being honest always leads to a better outcome.

And it is our responsibility to open that door and allow Grace into our lives. God already knows that the house is a mess, that our favorite pajamas are torn, that we make mistakes and feel that sometimes we behave in a way that suggests we are not at all worthy of love. It is our responsibility to ask for and receive the gifts of patience and forbearance, even if (especially if) the one we disagree with rushes to a place of fear and misunderstanding. God still loves, so we can too.

Please pray with me... God of infinite horizons, by your Spirit you are opening new places for our journey as your people. Give us a newborn's eyes to see your kingdom. By your untamable spirit, energize our souls so that we may serve as communities of promise and hope beyond the borders of language, skin color, economic or social position. Touch our lips to be the voice of grace and forgiveness. Use our hands and feet with a passion of your testimony till in harmony we grow together into the fullness of Christ. Amen.