

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Second Sunday in Lent, Year C
February 21, 2016

For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. – Psalm 84:10

I stand by the door.
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.
The door is the most important door in the world-
It is the door through which men walk when they find God.
There's no use my going way inside, and staying there,
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.
And all that so many ever find
Is only a wall where a door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind men,
With outstretched, groping hands.
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be one,
Yet they never find it..
So I stand by the door.

Those words were written by the Rev. Samuel Moor Shoemaker. He was the 12th Rector of Calvary Church and served here from 1952-1961. Sam was a prolific author, sought-after teacher, and was named one of the ten best preachers in the country by Newsweek magazine.

After serving at Calvary Church in New York City for 25 years, he had the good sense to come to Calvary in Pittsburgh. Upon his arrival, he said of our city, "It's better than New York." He was smart, too. While here, he started a program called the "Pittsburgh Experiment" that sought to take faith into everyday life. He said he hoped "...to make Pittsburgh as famous for God as it is for steel."

What Sam Shoemaker is best known for is his help in the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous and every other twelve step group it inspired. He is credited as the wellspring of ideas for AA, including being the spiritual foundation for the 12 steps. Sam changed countless lives through his life and ministry by keeping *one* thing in mind. Today, I want to focus on that single minded aim or approach to his vocation. We may not save thousands of people, but we can change at least one life, our own.

Sam wrote a poem called, "I Stand by the Door." He called it the "apologia" for his life. That is, the poem summarized the purpose for all he did in life and all he tried to be. Many people have read the poem and taken meaning and hope. That's all good. But there is a depth to it that might be easily missed. The whole context of his life and the poem are based on *one* bible verse, Psalm 84:10. *For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.*

To serve as a doorkeeper in the House of God was his purpose. Not a great aspiration on the surface. All the books he wrote, all the sermons he preached, all the lives he changed, all the programs for which he served as mid-wife... stemmed from that self-understanding of what a Christian is to be and is called to do... to stand by the door.

In a limited sense, the door is a symbol for the entrance to the Church, both the community and the building. To the outsider, it can be seen as a grand gate of welcome or a giant keep-out sign. That is one reason why we try to keep the literal doors of the church open when weather permits. It can be an entrance or a beautiful barrier. In another sense, the door is a symbol for moving from addiction or brokenness or alienation to finding health and wholeness and communion. Each is a valid interpretation.

The door is ultimately a symbol for the meeting place between a person and God. The door is the threshold between Heaven and Earth, our reaching out the divine just as God reaches out to embrace us. One day with God is better than a thousand anywhere else. Sam's vocation as a Christian was to help people find the way to meeting God.

An important point, for any way you read it, is that he understood his vocation so as not to fix anything for anyone or do it for them. We don't have to save anyone; Jesus saves, not us. The Christian's role is to help someone find the door to walk through on their own when they are ready. Nobody can force a person to come to worship or take the first steps to sobriety. It just doesn't work no matter how hard to you try or how much you care. But, we can help them find the way to walk though when the person is ready. Grace is never coerced but a gift to be received, discovered, lived, and shared.

It's not up to us to make anyone go through the door to find God or come to church. In the same vein, it's not up to us to try to keep people out. Lord knows, in some churches, many try to do exactly that. You can come... *when* you fit our idea of how you are supposed to act or talk or dress or think or look or believe. All throughout the gospels, people ridiculed Jesus because he let anybody and everybody in. Didn't he know what they were like or what they had done or who they were? Grace is never coerced but a gift to be received, discovered, lived, and shared.

The one who stands by the door to this world and the next, the Christian, doesn't have it all figured out. We can, at various times, find ourselves in all the places Sam describes in the poem. Outside looking in or wandering away. Standing close by. Those who come in and slip out the side. Part way in and part way out. Inside looking in or inside looking out at the world.

Every Christian, in a sense, is a doorkeeper, standing at the threshold between Heaven and Earth. Sometimes leaning in and sometimes leaning out. Our vocation is to live the Good News of grace and acceptance from God we discover in here- and take it out there into the world. It is to help someone find the threshold that, is for them, the most important door in the world – the place to find and be found by God. I think that's what Sam understood and lived.

The doorkeeper has a dual purpose – to welcome and to send. A person standing at the door makes it accessible and human and inviting. Even Walmart has that figured out. To welcome could mean to invite someone to church or to a meeting. But more than that, it is go with them. A welcome is always specific and particular or it is just a good idea rather than an invitation. A welcome to walk through the door to meet God could be anything from offering a coat to

one who is cold, to feeding the hungry, to making a home for the houseless, to a word of hope where there was none. It's whatever the person needs to find the door to God at the time.

The twin vocation of the doorkeeper, the Christian, is to welcome and to send. To stand by the door means always looking *out* at our neighbors living from what we found on the other side. We take it with us. To be sent out, in grace, means treating each person we meet as if we were meeting Christ himself at the threshold to Glory. Will you neighbor find the door through you?

I admire the people who go way in.
But I wish they wouldn't forget how it was
Before they got in. Then they would be able to help
The people who have not yet found the door,
Or the people who want to run away again from God.
You can go in too far and stay in too long,
And forget the people outside the door.
As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place,
Near enough to God and hear Him, and know He is there,
But not so far from men as not to hear them,
And remember they are there too.
Where? Outside the door –
Thousands of them, millions of them.
But – more important for me –
One of them, two of them, ten of them,
Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.
So I shall stand by the door and wait
For those who seek it.
For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God...
So I stand by the door.