

"Closing Doors"

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SCRIPTURE

excerpts from Psalms 59, 62 and 63

O God, I seek you and my soul thirsts for you
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
My soul waits quietly for you.
Only you are my rock, my redemption,
My haven: I shall not be moved.
You are kindness. You go before me
Letting me see the shape of my hope
Against this torment, no matter how strong.
I sing of your strength, yes, in the morning's dawn
I sing the steadying light of your kindness,
For you, O God, have been my release,
My refuge on the days when I am full of distress,
To you, my strength, I will sing,
For you are my refuge, my kindness.
Cover me, I pray, with your love.

from Romans, Chapter 12 - Let love be genuine; hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection and be eager to show respect for one another. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve God. Let your hope keep you joyful; be patient in your troubled times, and pray at all times. Be happy with those who are happy; weep with those who weep. Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

from Hebrews 11 - Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

SERMON - Our worship theme of "Doorways" this spring has been energizing and meaningful for me. We have these beautiful doors enhancing our Sanctuary, and we've heard the perspective of each artist about her door. We've reflected about opening doors in our own lives and in our faith journeys. Larry reminded us so vividly about the importance of opening ourselves to service and commitment here in the church and Andy encouraged us so beautifully to open the doors of our hearts and our time to our neighbors, to the people all around us, to intentionally seek and create community.

A couple weeks ago, I had a vivid dream about these doors. In the dream, I walked into the Sanctuary, and I saw that these five doors had been turned around, so that all I could see was the back of each door. The other side of each of these five wooden doors looked old, full of scratches and scars. In my dream, the bright colors were all gone. I woke up wondering what the other side of the doors actually look like. I thought about what it would be like to see the doors from the perspective of someone

who has stepped through the doorway, then turned around to see the back of the door, discovering that the door has closed behind them.

At that moment, I knew that I wanted to talk this morning about the other side of doorways, a topic which is in some ways the elephant sitting in the middle of the Sanctuary this morning, something that is on all of our minds that we need to acknowledge. All around us, in this time of tax cuts, lay-offs and a difficult economy, doors are closing.

In our congregation, perhaps sitting near you today, is someone who has devoted her life's work to research, overseeing a longitudinal study of high risk children since their birth. Government money for this grant evaporated this year, so this study of these children, who are now in adolescence, will never be completed. Near retirement, this person must now cover her salary with administrative and clinical responsibilities.

Perhaps sitting near you this morning is the UCG member who survived the wholesale firing of employees in her department, only to be reassigned to another job along with her one remaining employee and expected to do more work with fewer people.

In our congregation, there is a public school teacher whose bonus for being a mentor for other teachers has been cut entirely, along with many other commonplace things like money for ink for computer printers. She worries as she sees retirement pensions for Alachua County teachers being cut considerably, even though this county is already on the low end of the pay-scale for teachers nationwide.

There is someone, perhaps sitting near you, who has to refocus on working for the next ten years instead of beginning retirement.

There is a UCG mom who must shut the door of her option to work part-time so that she can be at home with her preschool child as much as possible. Instead, because of the current economic situation, she has to take a full-time job.

There is a man among us who teaches at UF whose department is being merged with two other departments, but there's no information on how this is going to work or how it will affect his job.

There is a mother, perhaps sitting near you today, who worries about what the property-tax cuts are going to mean for the continued funding of the group home where her developmentally-disabled adult daughter lives.

There is a departmental office manager who was set to retire from UF after 30 years of service this December. Her position was cut, forcing her to start a new job six months before her retirement date.

There is a man in this congregation who is part of a City Committee which reviews programs and organizations for funding. The money available for funding those programs has been significantly reduced. Does he recommend dramatically cutting the funds to each of the 25 applicant programs or does he recommend allocating zero funds to some programs and allot all the available resources to fewer targeted programs? Either way, he is the unwilling agent who has to shut the door for many people. This story is being played out again and again with public school administrators and university deans and chairpersons.

These are only a few of the stories in our congregation. For some of us, the doors are closing in our own lives. For all of us, the doors are closing for someone we know: a child, a grandchild, a parent, a friend, a neighbor, a UCG member. And in our community, in the state of Florida, we hear the sound of doors closing everywhere: in housing, in health care, in education, in governmental services.

Now, we at UCG are a spirited bunch, full of energy and enthusiasm. Someone once said to me that what he loves about this church is that we go toward health, we go toward wholeness, we are an open, accepting, upbeat, celebrating, filled-with-humor can-do congregation. So the question I'm grappling with is *how do we as individuals and how do we as a spiritual community respond to a world that seems full of shutting doors?* And I ask myself, *what does my faith offer in a time where things are already hard and seem to be getting worse?*

I am not up here today pretending that I have the answers to those questions. I am here to begin a conversation among us about how we are going to deal with, and survive, these difficult times. I believe the first thing we need to do in a hard time, is to acknowledge it, to name it, and to face the reality. So, no platitudes, please. And no negative thanksgivings, either. When you are called into a room with twenty other people and told that eleven of you have lost your jobs and the remaining nine of you will either be reassigned or will be doing double the work, it doesn't help, at the moment, to have someone else tell you: "*Be thankful that you still have your desk.*"

So first, I encourage each of you to tell your story. I encourage you to write it very specifically and personally, and send it to Governor Crist; send it to our representatives in the state House and Senate; send it to the people who think cutting property taxes to provide each of us with a very small measure of relief, is worth the loss of the essential services we all rely on. Put a face and a personal story on the consequences of these tax cuts.

Second, let's reach out to one another. One of the terrible consequences of this whole scenario in Florida is that so many people are in competition with one another for dwindling resources and so many people are in the position of having to pass down the pain to others as they enforce the policies that are sent down from above. Take time to ask each other what's happening; take time to listen to the stories, to be fully present to the frustration and the anger and the pain.

I don't believe there is any easy way out of this difficult time. In fact, I don't believe that things will ever go back to the way they were one, three or five years ago. The enormous national debt we have incurred, particularly because of the unpaid-for war in Iraq, the far-reaching effects of our economic turn-down, and the realities of climate and environmental change all mean that our lives are going to be different. So, third, there are things we will have to let go; there are changes we will have to make. We need to demand, and vote for, leaders who will speak the truth, who will lead us toward the changes that need to happen, and who will call us to meaningful sacrifice for the good of all, for the sake of our grandchildren, and everyone's grandchildren, and for the sake of this planet.

John Yungblut, a wonderful spiritual guide, wrote a book called On Hallowing One's Diminishments when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His point was

that, as spiritual people, we need to learn to bless what we have, even when it is time to let it go. For Yungblut, it was blessing his physical faculties as one by one, they were affected by his Parkinson's disease. Perhaps we can learn from that, understanding that we who were blessed with seemingly endless supplies of oil must now let that go, we who have been blessed with seemingly unlimited water and electricity must now conserve. We Americans, who have been the ultimate consumers of what is material and current and finite, who have had riches beyond the imagination of most of the world, will now be called back to learn the blessings of the simple and true gifts of life and of relationships and of community.

Let me share with you part of Sydney Lea's poem in the current issue of

*Christian Century: What is my dream? That life go on as ever
That all our lives go on.
No more than a dream, of course. I know,
the planet heating up, the politicians waving swords,
as if, by counter-logic, war might transform
earth into something more saintly.
So many facts conspire against me.
To know that, though, is to make me cling
The harder to gifts that appear to be given
Without my having to deserve them.
Flowers, the trees, and my disposition
in spite of all my darker doubt
that something soon will come down
like rain upon the mown grass,
as showers that water the earth.*

Fourth, we need to turn to the deepest roots of our faith. Like Sydney Lea, the poet, in spite of all my darker doubts, my faith is grounded in hope, like showers that water the earth. I am not exuberantly optimistic, but I am hopeful. I do believe that "*Faith is holy tenacity*" – tenacity being to hold fast, to hold together. My faith holds fast to a tough and life-long hope that is rooted in faithfulness, not rooted in success or material gain.

In response to these times, I call us together to affirm that kind of faith, that kind of hope, that is rooted in holy tenacity. It is the kind of hope and faith that the historical peace churches – the Quakers, the Mennonites - have maintained for centuries in the midst of constantly closing doors. It is the kind of hope and faith that the abolitionists, that the Martin Luther King, Jr.s, that the leaders for equal rights for all people, maintain. It is the kind of hope that the UCC Church of the Open Door in Miami's Liberty City exhibits when that congregation plants a garden, blooming with the beauty of exotic species, all growing together in the midst of the inner city. It is the kind of tenacious faith that leads us to choose CFL bulbs, to drive hybrid cars, to install rain barrels to water our yards, to explore solar energy for our homes and businesses.

This week, I invite each of us to name, and to write down, our three most precious hopes. That will show us where doors are threatening to close in our lives.

That will show us what to work and pray for. That will show us where to refocus our lives on what is most important.

In the midst of writing this sermon, I came into the Sanctuary and I actually looked to see what was on the other side of each of these doors. What I discovered was that the backs of these doors have histories that were once their own hopes. This one is painted a beautiful shade of peach, a tentative beginning. These three have white backs, obviously old paint, and are a bit scarred. This one has been repainted on the back with squares of black and white, ready for a new picture. The back of these five doors are good metaphors about my hope, my faith. While we only see the back of a door when it is closed, there is room on the back of that door for new pictures, new colors, new truth, to emerge on this other side. There is even room for a new focus on something very old that has been taken for granted. The holy tenacity of faith says to me that we will be called, and that we will find ways, to paint something new on the back of those doors that are closing. This is not a platitude; this is the hope of transformation, the hope of resurrection, the call not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good.

Tim Shriver, the Chairman of Special Olympics, says, *"Of course hope alone is not enough, but it is not trivial. It's not trivial to inspire people to want to get up and do something with someone else."* It is especially not trivial now, says Thomas Friedman, *"because millions of Americans are ready to be enlisted to fix education, to research renewable energy, to repair our infrastructure, to help others."* I think of Jimmy Carter going to the Middle East to talk to Hamas – an act of hope. And, my friends, how else can God act in this world unless we are willing to be agents of hope? But we are going to have to do this together. *"Hope," says Lin Yutang "is like a road in the country: there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence."* Our challenge, our call, is to hold fast to one another as agents of hope who walk the road to the future into existence.

Faith, remember, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. If we absolutely knew for certain what the future would bring, exactly what was going to happen, then we wouldn't need faith, we wouldn't need hope.

Lisel Mueller writes:

*Hope is the motion that runs from the eyes to the tail of a dog;
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs of the child that has just been born.
It is the singular gift we cannot destroy in ourselves,
the argument that refuses death,
the genius that invents the future.
It is all we know of God.
It is the serum which makes us swear
not to betray one another.
It is in this poem, trying to speak.*

And, my friends, it is in us – may we give it voice – and may we commit ourselves as a church community to walk the path together!

PRAYER - I call us now to a time of prayer, beginning with our Choral response, "O Lord, hear my prayer," which will be followed by a minute of silence. After the silence, I will conclude with a short spoken prayer.

There are times, O God, when the landscape of our lives changes, when doors close, when there is brokenness all around us. This is such a time.

We pray for a sense of faith that is tenacious, that holds on even when everything around us is shifting. We pray hope, the kind of hope that makes a difference every day in who we are and what we do and say. We pray to be the gift of listening and understanding for those who are hurting. We pray to be the gift of speaking and acting for those who need to hear our voice and our vision.

In these times of change, in these times of new life and new promises, may we find that even though the landscape changes, we may know Your Spirit, within us and among us, covering us with your love, our refuge and our strength. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN - REPRISE of "Give Yourself to Love" with adapted words – Lee Dunn Gader, soloist

Soloist - Kind friends all gathered round, there's something I would say,
That what brings us together here has blessed us all today.
Love has made a circle that holds us all inside
Where we join as a community and loneliness can't hide.

Congregation and soloist – Give yourself to hope, if change is what you're after,
Open up your heart to the tears and laughter
And give yourself to hope and give yourself to love.

Soloist – Hope is born in fire; it's planted like a seed.
Hope can't give you everything, but it gives you what you need.
Hope comes when you are ready; it comes when you're afraid.
It will be your greatest teacher, the best friend you've ever made.

Congregation and soloist - Give yourself to hope, if change is what you're after,
Open up your heart to the tears and laughter
And give yourself to hope and give yourself to love, give yourself to love.

***BENEDICTION** - Take courage, friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
And the stakes are very high.
Take courage, for deep down
There is another truth: you are not alone. ~ *Wayne Arnason*

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PS from UCG member Pradeep Kumar, who works with grievances at the University of Florida. Pradeep says: There is an internet petition going around protesting the UF layoffs, people could sign them, if they agree:

<http://www.petitiononline.com/UFlayoff/petition.html>

Also, if someone needs to talk to Pradeep about their rights and other options: they can reach me at home at 379-8781 or 392-6690 at the office.