

“Welcoming Christ”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
February 21st, 2016
2nd Sun. in Lent

Philippians 3:12-4:1

Luke 13:22-35

*Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—
the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body,
by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.*

Philippians 3:20-21

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to open the doors to our hearts that we may welcome you as Christ in our midst.

May we help others to open their hearts to welcome and receive you.

May we be willing to step through the door that leads to a wider world of living authentically,
to be whom you created us to be and help others to do the same.

Amen

There is a classic painting of Jesus standing outside of a door, knocking;

It is a reference to Revelation 3:20,

‘Behold! I stand at the door and knock...’

One of the details of this painting – and others like it, is that
there is no visible doorknob.

It’s a door that can only be opened from the inside.

The significance is that this is the doorway to a person’s heart

and the only way *that* doorway can open is by the heart owner’s choice.

It also means that the only way Christ will ever enter someone’s life
is by *their* choice.

That is essentially how love works, too, isn’t it?

It’s got to be by choice – though there is a lot of compromising
good and bad along the way.

Nobody can be forced to love someone or something –

because the instant a relationship is forced or compelled,
then it is no longer love.

That is why love is the most powerful thing in the universe,

it just won’t cooperate with compulsion –

and for the same reason, love is a reliable test for truth...

Even when we choose to open that doorway to our hearts –

and by ‘heart’, I mean that place within us where

our emotional and spiritual identity is seated,

there are risks, and some live to regret it.

A person whose trust has been betrayed

might choose to stop trying to be open – refusing ever to be hurt again,

or they just might choose to keep trying...

Willard, p.2

The important thing to remember is that as long as we live,
we have a choice – and that's the only way love can work,
that's the only way the Holy Spirit of God
chooses to work in someone's life.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love and Christ is the personification of that love.
Our job as Christians is to help people encounter God through Christ
by encouraging them to open the doors of their hearts
just as we open our hearts to Christ.

So, what happens then? Are we supposed to feel something?
Certainly joy can happen, but should we expect some kind of euphoria?
Is a true Christian always supposed to feel that way?

That would sound too similar to why some people drink alcohol or take drugs –
and the style of some Christian teachings and worship experiences
seem to suggest this.

In seeking to help people find a healthy alternative to addiction,
Jesus is presented as the 'Lord and Master' of one's life – and that's true.
But the way in which this is done sometimes makes me think
that Jesus is just being offered as another 'drug of choice'.

I think of some services I have attended where people stand singing praise songs
for 20 minutes at the beginning of the service
as if to hypnotize the congregation into a low level trance.
To some extent, we do that, too – though not standing for 20 minutes.
For one thing not too many of us could do that.
The nature of worship is to create a sacred space as a low level trance
for people to enter in, through a song, a story, and prayer –
but you have to go back out, too.
As the saying goes, 'When the worship ends, the service begins' –
the *servicing* begins beyond these doors...

The whole verse of Revelation 3:20 as found in the RSV is:

*Behold, I stand at the door and knock;
if any one hears my voice and opens the door,
I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*

Another example of this verse comes from the Common English Bible:

*Look! I'm standing at the door and knocking.
If any hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them,
and they will have dinner with me.*

We see in this verse the element of hospitality –
of having a meal together which symbolizes true community.

Willard, p.3

Specifically, this refers to the *communion-ity* of God personified as Christ abiding within us to feed us – by inspiring us.

Sometimes items on that menu include bitter herbs as well as our ‘just desserts’, but it is also a rich gourmet stew along with our daily bread.

I am not saying this as a feeling or vision that everyone is supposed to have, because I think we are all different in how we think and feel – and in what we need.

But God meets us at the level of who we are and how our hearts operate.

I think that is how people can be Buddhists and Jews and Muslims and scientists and so forth as well as Christians, who are loved and accepted by God.

God meets us where we are at – and the key to the door is love.

What we as Christians have to offer humanity is access to God at three levels:

God the Creator – whom we know through Genesis, is present in the natural world from the workings of its subatomic building blocks to the farthest flung stars.

God through Christ puts a face on the unseen mystery of God to serve as an ethical example of forgiveness and love to follow in our daily human commerce and community.

God the Holy Spirit – present within the conscious life of hearts and minds as well as the life-giving principle that transcends the realities of elemental nature and human nature.

Opening the doorway into our hearts for Christ to enter and inspire us with nutritious portions of self-reflection, of repentance – or the turning away from self-destructive habits, and renewal that comes with self-acceptance.

But as we invite Christ into our hearts, at the same time, Christ is inviting us into a wider world.

As it is written in Luke 13:22-35...

²³And some one said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?”

And [Jesus] said to them, ²⁴“Strive to enter by the narrow door...”

But then Jesus goes on to say,

“...for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.”

Why would someone be turned away?

A clue may be in the imagery of hospitality of the next verse and the rules of taking in travelers back in Jesus’ day...

²⁵“When once the householder has risen up and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us.’

He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from’...”

Willard, p.4

The early church began by the followers of Christ going out
2 by 2, with no money or sleeping bag or extra shoes
but to heal the sick, cast out evil spirits, raise the dead,
and proclaim that the Kingdom was coming 'on Earth as it is in Heaven'.
The door to be opened is not simply the one that leads into one's 'heart' alone,
but also the doorway that leads outward, taking us outside of ourselves.
That doorway can be a narrow one, but it leads to a richer life if we trust God.

That doorway leads outside to a world of diversity and beauty, as well as complexity,
for God will not allow us as Christians to stay in the womb of our own 'hearts'.
We are led out to find God in those three realms of experience –
of the physical world, human commerce, and inner emotional life.
We are called into living authentically – or to live the 'life eternal',
the life of being in the present moment.

Living such a life 'in Christ', is to live responsibly with other people while living up
to one's potential, actualized as the person we have been created to be.
Those early disciples stepped through the narrow doors of their own understanding
to share the fellowship of their inward life with a world starving for such
hope and joy that comes with Christian community.

By the way, the Fundraising activities we do here are not just about raising money,
but are kind of an excuse for us to work and do "fun-raising", so to speak.
This afternoon, many people will walk through our doors
to hear a Seeds of Hope concert – again the occasion for fellowship
and for our guests to 'taste and see' what we are about.
Next Tuesday afternoon, people will enter our doors to attend CPR training and
that evening, I'll enter the doors of Royal's community center to do scripture
introducing a dramatic event about abolitionist Frederick Douglas.
Thursday, Rev. Louise Tallman will enter the doors of Sumter Grand on CR 466A
to present a program on grief counseling at a spiritual conference there.
Next Sunday, 28 men from Hope Lutheran's Houses of Hope project
will enter our doors as guests and their program's director Len Robertson
will provide our Mission Moment for that day.
Nancy Bell's production of "Faith Club" on Saturday, February 27th will be
a new occasion for interfaith visitors to cross our threshold, to enter our doors,
and to help bridge the abyss between Jew, Christian, and Muslim.
Monica Peidl's memorial on Saturday, March 5th will be another occasion
to welcome visitors here, but it will also be a reminder to us all
of the doorway everyone must pass through to go home to God.
Though this sounds like the calendar of our church events,
still, these are occasions to welcome the Christ whom we meet in others –
as well as to welcome the Christ they meet in us.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Philippians 3:12-4:1 is about
welcoming the example of Christ as an alternative for how we respond
to the competing demands of our daily lives.*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

^{3:12} It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected,
but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it
because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose.

¹³ Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing:
I forget about the things behind me
and reach out for the things ahead of me.

¹⁴ The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way,
and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her.

¹⁶ Only let's live in a way that is consistent
with whatever level we have reached.

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, become imitators of me and watch those who live this way—
you can use us as models.

¹⁸ As I have told you many times and now say with deep sadness,
many people live as enemies of the cross.

¹⁹ Their lives end with destruction.
Their god is their stomach, and they take pride in their disgrace
because their thoughts focus on earthly things.

²⁰ Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—
the Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body,
by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.

^{4:1} Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss,

who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 13:22-35

²² He went on his way through towns and villages,
teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem.

²³ And some one said to him,
“Lord, will those who are saved be few?”

And he said to them,

²⁴ “Strive to enter by the narrow door;
for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

²⁵ When once the householder has risen up and shut the door,
you will begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying,
‘Lord, open to us.’

He will answer you,
‘I do not know where you come from.’

²⁶ Then you will begin to say,
‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’

²⁷ But he will say,
‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from; depart from me,
all you workers of iniquity!’

²⁸ There you will weep and gnash your teeth,
when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob
and all the prophets in the kingdom of God
and you yourselves thrust out.

²⁹ And [people] will come from east and west, and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first,
and some are first who will be last.”

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him,
“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”

³² And he said to them,
“Go and tell that fox,
‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow,
and the third day I finish my course.

³³ Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following;
for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.’

³⁴ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!
How often would I have gathered your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
and you would not!

³⁵ Behold, your house is forsaken.
And I tell you, you will not see me until you say,
‘Blessed is [the one] who comes in the name of the Lord!’”