

KNOCKING ON THE DOOR



Alice Fleming Townley
June 28, 2020
Luke 11: 1, 5-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray . . . "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. (Luke 11: 1, 9)

And Jesus said, "If you want to know how to pray . . . ask, search, and knock."ⁱ As a friend responds to another in distress, as a parent responds to a child who is hunger, even more so, God responds to give the Holy Spirit." What 'knocks at the door' do you remember that opened into Holy space? Some knocks we anticipate warmly. Other knocks come as a surprise. Some knocks persist and get louder while we search for the door and fumble with how to open it. There are some memories of 'knocking at the door' that stay with us.

As a child, I especially remember how exciting it was to knock on the brown door and peer in backwards through the peep hole as I waited with anticipation after a long car ride. At Clark Home, the United Methodist Retirement Home in Grand Rapids, my Mom would head towards her Mother's room and send me to see her Mother's sister, Aunt Helen, on another floor. Aunt Helen and I adored one another. To be in another's presence was joy and comfort. In earlier days I would visit her in her apartment which had a kitchen. She would have the table set for two when I arrived, with green glasses, and her scalloped square plates. We would drink juice and eat graham crackers sandwiches with chocolate frosting. She would tell me stories of struggle and strength. Sometimes we would sit by a tree and imagine. Even at Clark home, with no kitchen, and no tree, she would feed me. We knew where to find the ice cream.

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me." Revelation 3:20

It was a summer afternoon and I was alone at my rural church when I heard a knock on the door. I didn't recognize the car, and I opened the door to a stranger. The young sales woman had been knocking on doors all afternoon with her Mary Kay bag. She was tired, and searching, and wondering. She had driven by the church many times and always wanted to stop. She wondered if maybe she could find God and her problems would disappear. She thought I might have a list of directions she could follow.

“Come in,” I said. After some time, I responded as a wise soul once did with me when I was searching. “Dear One, God gave you the desire for God. God is already present in your life. . . Those problems won’t ‘disappear,’ but God is knocking and longing for you to open to Holy presence in the midst of them.” She started coming to church regularly. Over the months of conversations that followed her insights, strength and faith inspired me. When one of us moved away, she gifted me with a bottle of her Mary Kay perfume too costly for me to buy and which I have saved over 20 years. It is sacramental, reminding me of how we both encountered the Holy that day.

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Kent Workman was on the phone when he heard a knock on his office door. He stopped what he was doing and gave the students his complete attention. “We heard you worked in construction while in college. Would you be our advisor for a Habitat for Humanity Club at Michigan State University?” They claimed it wouldn’t take much time. They only needed his signature. “They lied,” laughs Kent.

Kent’s ‘yes’ led from one door to another. That fall he and the students started volunteering with Lansing Habitat for Humanity. In the spring they traveled to St. Louis Missouri to volunteer. In the years that followed, Kent ended up in leadership on the Board of Directors of Lansing Habitat. He traveled with students around the country and then with Jimmy Carter Habitat builds in the Philippines, South Korea, Mexico, South Africa, and Thailand.

As Kent reflected this week, “Answering this knock on my office door was one of the best things I ever did. A door to the world was opened for me to some of the most fulfilling experiences I have ever had.” Kent realized this week that in 40 days he will turn 70, and he has decided to write daily about doors in his life, 40 doors in 40 days.

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Mary Anne Larzalere is a charter member of our church and is part of our Wednesday contemplative class. She grew up in Detroit when it was rigidly segregated. She remembers her childhood tears when walking hand in hand with a family friend who was African American, and a mean boy began to jeer at them. She remembers her shock and fury when traveling in Missouri as a young adult with a friend who was turned away at the lunch counter because she was black. When the Civil Rights Movement began, she wanted to march but was too afraid. It seemed too scary, but still the urge to do something grew in her. It was as if the knock on the door got louder and louder. She felt called to be in public solidarity but struggled to know what to do.

Mary Anne heard about the Earl Nelson Singers and started attending their concerts in Lansing. Earl Nelson was wanting to preserve the dignity of the Negro spirituals. She began teaching at Walnut School, and one of her co-workers, Ruby Frazier, African American, was a member of the choir. Mary Anne shared how much she loved their music. "You could sing with us." Invited Ruby. And so, for 55 years, Mary Anne and Ruby have stood next to each other, often holding hands, as they sing. Another choir member who stood close, Octavia Watts, had a grandfather who was a slave, and at age 8 was freed and walked from Mississippi to Missouri to find work on a farm. Octavia's grand-daughter is a physician at John Hopkins. When Octavia died, Mary Anne was invited to speak at her dear friend's funeral. Being a part of the Earl Nelson Singers became a deepening experience of learning sacred stories, songs, and strength of her African American friends. Singing the spirituals gives witness to the horror of slavery, to human resiliency, and the power of God.

*Stony the road we trod
Bitter the chastening rod
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died
Yet with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered
Out from the gloomy past
'Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast*

*God of our weary years
God of our silent tears
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way . . .
Lift ev'ry voice and sing
'Til earth and heaven ring*

Ring with the harmonies of libertyⁱⁱ . . .

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"Those who open the door of their heart experience a communion both nourishing and transforming."ⁱⁱⁱ wrote Joyce Rupp. So, may we listen to the knocks at the door, the inner nudges, the opportunities that emerge. Perhaps the hands knocking are very small, or perhaps aged and wrinkled. Sometimes they are strangers or well known to us. Sometimes they spread the table before us, or show us how to seek and find, or hand us a hammer and an invitation, or hold our hand as together we lift our voices. "Holy gates are everywhere." Said Rabbi Lawrence Kushner.^{iv} Watch. Listen. Behold.

ⁱ Luke 11:1, 9

ⁱⁱ 339, James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," *Glory to God Hymnal*, 2013, John Knox Press.

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