

# CLOSING THE DOOR



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*But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6*

Elijah had been working hard, but just when he thought things were getting better, Queen Jezebel, wanted to kill him. Elijah thought it would be best if he ran away. He ran until he could run no more, and then he collapsed. He had no life left in him. An Angel of the Lord appeared where he slept, and said, “Eat and drink, or the journey will be too much for you.”

After 40 days and nights, Elijah burrowed into a cave in Mt. Horeb. The word of the Lord came, saying, “What are you doing here?” Elijah told his sad story.

Then the Word said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks . . . but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” (I Kings 19:11-12)

And it was in that stillness that Elijah felt the assurance and the nudge. Look around. Behold the mystery and be filled by the Holy— with the sense of Deep Abiding Presence. And, return to the struggle.”

In the gospels, we read about how Jesus intentionally went out into the wilderness alone for 40 days so that he could listen. Jesus did that after his baptism when he heard the Voice of Love. Jesus fasted and prayed and heard not just the Voice of Love but also the voice of temptations. In the solitude he found rest and food and angels who aided him. Jesus emerged with clarity and energy to begin his public ministry. And later, even when crowds searched for him and needs pressed upon him, Jesus would retreat at times to rest and pray. Jesus said to the disciples, “*Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door.*” (Matthew 6:6)

We are in a six-week series using the metaphor of the door based on Joyce Rupp’s book, *Open the Door: A Journey to the True Self*. We have reflected on the door of our hearts,

knocking on the door, opening the door, standing in the threshold, and now closing the door.

What might we need to close the door on? I find myself checking my New York Times app incessantly, searching for news about Covid. I think I am really searching for certainty in the midst of uncertainty. I want to read and see what's going to happen as if looking for the last page in a novel. I do not find what I'm looking for in the daily newspapers. So this week, I've tried to interrupt that habit and read the headlines a bit less so as to expand my open space for grief and discomfort and peace. There is peace in the storm that the world cannot give. Perhaps we need to shut the door on constant words, to find what we seek.

Sometimes we need to close the door on messages that wound or undermine us, especially if we are giving them to ourselves. I remember being very tired on Christmas Eve a few years ago, as many of us often are with the preparation and excitement. I had carefully pre-printed all the scriptures so as not to make any mistakes in my readings for the late service. Only after I sat down did I realize that not only did I print the wrong text, I read the one someone else had just finished. I could hear the echo and cringed for days. And then a dear church member called me and left a message. She explained she had not meant to call me. She had dialed the wrong number, but she thought she would leave a message anyway. She continued, "thank you, for being you and all you do." Her words were like the sweetest honey. Later in the silence it dawned on me, I could choose which message I had on repeat, the voice of lacking or the voice of blessing.

In this week's readings Joyce Rupp asked, "What do you need to tear up . . . to give away . . . to burn . . . to remove?" I found myself journaling with these questions, and returning to them, expanding each time. As she herself penned:

*I am tearing up old behavioral patterns of judging others, being too busy and anxious, of not having enough solitude and communion with the earth. I want to give away whatever keeps me from being my true self, from living freely and simply, from being rooted in God. I wish to burn old memories and experiences that wound myself and others. I want to remove any obstacle that keeps me from being a loving woman.<sup>i</sup>*

Just as Elijah and Jesus needed to step away, ponder and gain new insight, so do we. They could face what drained and scared and tempted them. They could also receive the rest and nourishment they so needed. They could hear the Voice of Love and find their own expression. We might not have the luxury of 40 nights and days, but could we take 4 breathes, then 4 minutes, and let that expand?

Joyce Rupp continues in her reflection prompts, "What do you need to plant . . . to sing . . . to create . . . to wear?" She realized she wanted:

*to plant seeds of kindness, a deep reverence for our planet, a healthy spirituality, to plant these seeds in myself and in all I meet. I want to sing the song of my soul, to create the books waiting in my heart, to wear freedom and love.*<sup>ii</sup>

What is it we want to create? To cultivate? To express?

*In 2006 a high school English teacher asked students to write a famous author and ask for advice. They received these words Kurt Vonnegut:*

*I thank you for your friendly letters. You sure know how to cheer up a really old geezer (84) in his sunset years. I don't make public appearances any more. . .*

*What I had to say to you, moreover, would not take long: Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow . . .*

*God bless you all!*

*Kurt Vonnegut*<sup>iii</sup>

Could we close the door on judgement and lists and ought-tos, that we might open to hearing and developing our own voices and gifts? In creating—whether it be-- sermon writing, song writing, picture making, cooking, playing, and building and more-- we enter that Holy creative energy that brings life into being.

Fannie Lou Hamer was born on October 6, 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi, the 20<sup>th</sup> and last child of sharecroppers Lou Ella and James Townsend. Her parents' strength and resiliency guided her spirit. By age six she joined her family picking cotton and by age 12, she left school to work. In 1944, she married Perry Hamer and the couple toiled on a Mississippi plantation. Because Hamer was the only worker who could read and write, she also served as plantation timekeeper.

In 1962, Hamer attended a meeting led by civil rights activists James Forman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and James Bevel of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Hamer was incensed by efforts to deny blacks the right to vote. She became an organizer and on August 31, led 17 volunteers to register to vote at the Indianola, Mississippi Courthouse. Denied the right to vote due to an unfair literacy test, the group was harassed on their way home by the police. That night, the plantation owner fired her, punished her husband, and confiscated their property because of her attempt to vote.

In June 1963, after moving and after successfully registering to vote, Hamer and several other black women were arrested for sitting in a “whites-only” bus station restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina. At the jailhouse, Hamer and several of the women were brutally beaten by the officers, leaving her with lifelong injuries from a blood clot in her eye, kidney damage, and leg damage. She would later rise to testify to the nation and to Congress.

Hamer’s contemplative practices and her family and relationships took her to a deeper “knowing.” Drawing on these she could love the crucifier, bless the torturer, embrace the jailer, and pray for his or her salvation. <sup>iv</sup>In her praying she ‘closed the doors’ to the voices of the systems, white supremacy and evil; so she could hear who God said she really was and what she needed to do next. Fannie Lou Hamer found her focus, restoration, and life in God in the midst of the beloved community already here and yet coming. She became an important, passionate, and powerful voices of the civil and voting rights movements and a leader in the efforts for greater economic opportunities for African Americans.<sup>v</sup>

Maybe today we can relate to Elijah, we have been really working, and still so much is hard and has maybe gotten worse. Maybe the best thing we can do is hear Jesus say, “Shut the door and pray.” With Jesus and Elijah hear the angels say, “Rest. Eat and drink.” “Be Still and know that I am God.” And may we practice moving with God’s life-giving spirit--write, dance, sing, play, create something. And when the systems seek to silence us, draw from a deeper source, as did Fannie Lou Hamer.

As the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, “I am grateful to God . . . when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. . . I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you . . . for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-control.” (I Timothy 1, 5-7) Amen.

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<sup>iii</sup> Posted July 13, 2020, 6:35pm, *Upworthy*, <https://www.facebook.com/Upworthy/>

<sup>iv</sup> Barbara Holmes, “Contemplative Activists,” July 14, 2020, Richard Rohr, *Center for Action and Contemplation*, <https://cac.org/civil-rights-contemplative-2020-07-14/>

<sup>v</sup> Edited by Debra Michals, “Fannie Lou Hamer,” National Women’s History Museum, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer>