

AN OPEN DOOR

Micah 6:6-8

Revelation 3:7-8

Matthew: 5: 1-3

First Church in Windsor May 16, 2010

It's good to be back and worship with you this morning and I thank Rick for the opportunity to preach on John Warham Sunday. It was a great privilege to serve this church family. First Church in Windsor has a long and rich history. Rockwell Harmon Potter, a former minister at Center Church in Hartford, used to refer to you as "Mother Windsor." And now, in the 21st century, "Mother Windsor" is demonstrating again that the faith of our mothers and fathers can come alive in a new time.

About 40 years ago, give or take a year, we had a contest here at First Church. It was about finding a new name for the church newsletter. At that point I think the newsletter was simply called "The Newsletter." People came up with various suggestions but Jon Day's was the one that stuck. Jon, who was the Associate Minister at the time, suggested we call it "The Edge."

The Edge is really not a clear cut, defining name. Like a story or a parable, it tends to draw us out. "Why in the world does a church newsletter have a name like that?" we might ask. "The edge of what?" But that's just the point. We are invited to fill in the blanks. It draws out rather than defines. So it could be the cutting edge, the creative edge, the growing edge, the edge like the green cambium layer inside the bark of a tree, the edge of mystery, the edge that marks the thin place between the world we live in every day and the world of the Spirit.

The early Christian church took root in a very defined world, the world of the Roman Empire. The Romans loved order more than anything else. They wanted everything to be under control. This wasn't all bad. The Romans built roads and bridges and aqueducts, some of which are still around. People could travel from place to place in relative safety. But it was also a hemmed in kind of world. It had no good news for either the poor or for those who felt like outsiders. It offered no real hope for the spiritually hungry. Just one dead end after another.

One of the scripture lessons this morning is from the book of Revelation. Revelation is a strange, almost a weird book, written in a kind of code language. For instance there are references to the beast, which most scholars say refers to the emperor, possibly Caligula. One of the Protestant reformers dismissed Revelation with the comment that a revelation ought to be revealing. But, every once in a while, Revelation says something that really soars. It speaks for instance, of "a new heaven and a new earth" and of a time when "every tear shall be wiped away" because "the former things are past and gone." In today's reading, addressed to the church in Philadelphia, The author of Revelation declares that God has "set before you an open door which no one can close." Imagine the impact of these words on those people.

Our friends George and Martha live in Valdosta, Georgia. They are an amazing pair, both now retired. We stopped by to see them on a southern trip in the early spring of 2009. Martha spent her career as a teacher. George is a minister. He is also an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous. During our visit he happened to be speaking at an AA meeting and invited us to attend. George told his story and invited others to tell theirs. They all spoke of a "higher power:" which had helped them stay sober and on whom they continued to rely. Part of the A.A. program involves members supporting others going through struggles similar to their own. It means standing by and showing there IS a way ahead. Life is not a series of head ends. A way WILL open to those who know their need and ask for help.

Does this sound like the church or at least what the church is meant to be?

When people come to church they probably do so for a variety of reasons. But deep down I suspect most people are looking for a way ahead and for some help in finding it. They are looking for God. A story that sticks with me tells about a man who stopped by regularly at a little wayside chapel, somewhere in the French countryside. The chapel was a simple structure with a crucifix on the wall. "What do you do when you go in there?" asked a curious neighbor. The man thought for a moment and then he said: "I just look at Jesus and Jesus just looks at me."

Part of the invitation in one communion ritual says: "Come not to express an opinion but to seek a presence." Maybe that's what brings people to church, a search for a Presence. Lucille and I are now members of Center Church. It's well named because it's right smack in the center of downtown Hartford. Three years ago an intern at Center Church started what has come to be known as the coffee ministry. Volunteers set up a table, either on the sidewalk or under the church portico. They serve coffee, hot chocolate, energy bars. One recent Sunday we served about 60 people. A great many are homeless men. Others are riders getting on or off a bus. They are unfailingly polite and appreciative. We close up shop at ten o'clock, a half-hour before the service begins.

Lately a few of the men have been drifting into church, usually sitting in the back few rows. Sometimes they appear to be praying. One might be sobering up. On a cold Sunday they literally come in out of the cold. We try to make them feel at home, especially during the passing of the peace. Some come back. Most don't. Do we see the face of Christ in these visitors? I think quite often we do. Does it help us to worship? I think it does. We don't feel as though we're doing some great thing in welcoming these visitors. It's more like we are being blessed. And it's a reminder that all of us stand together in our need for God.

One of today's scripture lessons consists of the first three verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and reads in part "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." The New English Bible puts it a little differently. That version says "How blest are those who know their need of God." In other words people often begin to find God when they are up against it and have no place else to turn.

For over 20 years Harvey Cox has been teaching a course at Harvard. The course is called "Jesus and the Moral Life." At first it was anybody's guess how many students would enroll. But enroll they did, by the dozens, and then by the hundreds, requiring moves to larger and larger lecture halls. Cox, a genuinely humble man, whose favorite hymn is "What A Friend We Have In Jesus", still seems amazed at the response. The students really wanted to know about Jesus.

Last year Harvey Cox wrote a book called "The Future of Faith." He sees

a new church beginning to take shape. It's what some have called an emerging church, a re-invigorated church. One marked by congregations not unlike the ones that sprang up in the early days of Christianity. It's kind of like going back to the future.

For the first two or three hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection local congregations showed an amazing amount of energy and vitality. They weren't without shortcomings. What human institution ever is? But they gave people hope in the closed Roman world. Then a Roman Emperor named Constantine embraced the new religion and forced everyone to be baptized. Some people think that the so-called conversion of Constantine was one of the worst things that ever happened to Christianity.

It marked the beginning of what Cox called the "Age of Belief", an age that lasted for another 1,500 years. Theologians wrote creeds like the Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed and others. Leaders argued and with one another over the nature of Christ, Being a Christian meant affirming certain propositions. If you didn't agree with the propositions you just weren't a Christian. In the last two centuries, among some Protestants, the propositions included a literal interpretation of certain verses of the bible.

Times are changing, Cox reminds us. I can sense it in this congregation and in others. We are entering a new age of the Spirit, in some ways similar to the early church. In this new world it isn't agreeing to a set of propositions that opens the way ahead. It really never was. Nor is it a matter of having the right doctrine but of knowing your need and seeking a Presence. It's like we're being reminded again of what was always at the heart of Christianity.

For many years a woman named Fran Drury taught Kindergarten in Windsor and ran the Sunday School here at First Church. She touched the lives of untold numbers of people some of whom are sitting here today. As a girl and young woman Fran said she had been painfully shy. But she refused to give in to it. She always accepted new challenges, saw open doors and prayerfully moved right through the opening. Fran was a great person to preach to, very affirming, often more so than I deserved. When she sang a hymn like "I Love to Tell the Story" you had the sense that it was her story as well. And she was one of the most forward looking of people. I feel as though Fran is still cheering you all on.

I had a lovable but somewhat eccentric Aunt named Betty. Aunt Betty's promotion of this or that cause irritated some members of our family. When she was on a cause she could talk about nothing else. I remember Aunt Betty remonstrating with my mother. "Katharine" she'd say, "you're boiling off all the good vitamins from those carrots." But Aunt Betty did have a way with words. Occasionally we would talk on the phone. In one of our conversations I asked her how she was doing. "Oh my dear" she said. "I'm riding the waves,"

At moments when they can't see their way ahead people testify to being given a strength beyond their own, to ride the waves.

I guess I've always been partial to people from Kentucky, at least since I married a young woman from that state. Wendell Berry is a Kentucky farmer, writer and poet who has become sort of a patron saint of mine. Berry is a deeply grounded man, rooted in the earth and in the spirit of the scriptures. He knows from his own experience that doubts, struggles and apparent dead ends can lead to new beginnings. One of his poems is called "The Real Work." I think it speaks for itself:

: "It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work.

and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey

the mind that is not baffled is not employed

the impeded stream is the one that sings."

"How blest are those who know their need of God." Could that be a word to each of us here, wherever we may be on our way? And also to this wonderful congregation, so full of life and caring people? I think it is both. So sing on, First Church in Windsor. Walk through the open doors as you begin to see them. You won't always be right but you'll be heading in the right direction. May God continue to bless and keep you. Amen.