

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
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I Stand by the Door
Psalm 84:1-12

Long before Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*, revitalized interest in France's Chartres Cathedral, the town was a point of Christian pilgrimage. The Chartres Cathedral is more than a building. Constructed as a replacement for the 11th century Roman cathedral, Chartres' Notre Dame acted as a visual library, as well as a place of worship. Since most people during the Middle Ages could not read, architecture, icons, stained-glass windows, labyrinth, and images told stories. A guide who provided tours of the cathedral once said: "It is alive, it changes, it breathes."¹

By all means, sanctuaries and cathedrals are not needed for worship. Any old bush will do...any place, any event, any encounter which compels us to "take off our shoes" in recognition of the "holy ground" on which we stand becomes a cathedral or temple.

Forty-nine founding members established the official congregation for the purpose of worship, fellowship, and continuation of the gospel. Hilton Presbyterian's original sanctuary was dedicated on October 9, 1921. In 1982, the building we are in replaced the original. Just like the Chartres Cathedral, its uses are many—worship, rehearsals, graduations, talent shows, special meetings, with its primary reason for existence being to remind, encourage, and teach. The stained-glass windows were designed specifically for this building. They, too, tell stories that existed before any of us were born and will live beyond us all. Moving counter-clockwise, the icons in the windows tell of creation and Jewish history, the story of Jesus in the center sections, and conclude with the story of the early church.

Who knows how many people have discovered their faith in this place. How many life-changing decisions have taken place in here. Couples have pledged their lives in marriage before this altar. Loved ones have formally said

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity* (New York, HarperCollins: 2009), 85-86.

their good-byes during funeral and memorial services. Several times each month, a significant gathering of preschoolers sit on these front pews with altar candles lit. In the light of these windows they sing and hear a story about how to live a life of love and are reminded of God's presence. Parents that I don't even know retell a story their child has heard in this place. In many ways, this place too is "alive...it changes...it breathes."

Today's Psalm (Psalm 84) is an echo of a voice being awed by the presence and "house" of God. The first eight verses speak of his soul "longing, crying out, singing, being happy, and finding strength" in that lovely dwelling place.

The last four verses speak of the commitment this pilgrim has to the world beyond: "I'd rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God...." People visit Hilton Presbyterian Church for the first time through many means. Some come because they have been personally invited by you, which always pleases me. Some come because they drove through the neighborhood and saw our building. About three-fourths of our first-time visitors now meet us first through our website and come to have a firsthand look.

In his new book, Nelson Searcy speaks about the power of the first impression as it relates to churches. "Seven minutes is all you get to make a positive first impression." During the first seven minutes, he says, "your first-time guests will know whether or not they are coming back. That's before a single worship song is sung and before a single word of the message is uttered."² What occurs is mental "thin-slicing," to use a Malcolm Gladwell term. Gladwell says our minds are often made up much faster than that—in a "blink."³ What both would be saying for us is that guests aren't making a logical decision based on integrity and character of the staff or members, nor the church's theology. They are not weighing the pros and cons of worship styles and theological viewpoints. Instead, their subconscious minds are working at lightening speed, assessing their compatibility with our church's environment. Searcy speaks of four initial areas of contact through what he refers to as the "street to seat" process—how guests are "greeted, directed, treated, and seated."

² Nelson Searcy, *Fusion* (Ventura, California, Regal: 2007), 49.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (New York, Little, Brown and Company:2005).

There are really two facets of all of this: (1) not wanting our guests to be turned off and turned away by a *false* impression of who we are, and (2) being sure we *are* who we need to be as the Body of Christ.

“Everything speaks to first-time guest—everything,” Searcy says. That’s the reason our lawn and entrance areas are important. That’s the reason our narthex needs to always be clean and uncluttered...all entrance doors unlocked and lights on. A timed light comes on the stained-glass windows at night, and low-watt eco-friendly bulbs light the narthex day and night to subtly convey that Hilton Presbyterian Church is “alive.” Restrooms need to be well marked and inviting. Friendly faces offering directions to children’s classes or nursery is always important. All our senses are at work when we visit a new place. That’s the reason fresh coffee and fruit at a visitor’s center can be important. We get use to clutter in a corner, peeling paint, and outdated material on a table. But, first-time guests will notice it every time. Feeling welcomed and respected are key to a successful impression for first-time visitors.

The other side of this coin is being sure we *are* authentically hospitable to those looking from the outside. Without question, being hospitable to each other as members should be a given. What is hospitality? The friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. Church consultant, Paul Borden, has said, “People are looking for friends, not friendliness.” Truly being the Church, the Body of Christ, means that all who come to our doors are welcomed and respected and invited to a place around our “table.”

In her team’s study of vital characteristics (referred to as “signposts”) in mainline churches, Diana Butler Bass discovered that hospitality was the number one common trait of church health.⁴ Christian Schwartz, a European church consultant, uses the term “loving relationships.” Hospitality is not a program, not a single hour or ministry in the life of a congregation. It stands at the heart of a Christian way of life, a living icon of wholeness in God. Sometimes you experience it in a church; sometimes you experience it in the middle of nowhere.

Several years ago during vacation days, Jennifer and I went to the Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in the mountains of north Georgia. An announcement

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York, HarperCollins: 2006), 77-87.

during the service gave details about their picnic following the service at the summer home of Jim Kollock. At the moment, we didn't recognize his name, but later realized the name to be that of the artist whose print hung on one of our walls. We—the strangers—were taken in as honored guests.

One Fourth of July, Jennifer and I made our way at dusk to a field on a backroad a mile from the Mall of Georgia. That mall always displayed exceptional fireworks on the Fourth. Several days earlier, I spotted this field with an open view of the mall. When we arrived that evening in the dimming light, other cars were also gathering. We took our folding chairs, found a good spot, and staked out our territory. Sometime before the fireworks began, a gentleman came around with slices of watermelon and handed them to us.

"Thanks, but we're not a part of your group. We were just aware of this field and wanted to get a good view of the fireworks."

"This is my family's old home place property," the man shot back. "Our whole family usually gathers here to view the fireworks."

I stood and began apologizing for intruding and not even asking about whose land we were on. When I indicated we would excuse ourselves, he insisted we stay and share the homegrown watermelons with his family.

"Hospitality, a radically biblical and democratic practice, opens the way for all people to be the same under God, part of the same family, welcomed for who [you] are in all [your] uniqueness."⁵ Hospitality eliminates cliques, political parties, racial prejudice, educational differences, age, gender, nationalities, ethnic groupings, gender preference, and even religious orientation. Jesus' style of hospitality accepts people as they are. Being a doorkeeper to that diversity comes about only after we've experienced being accepted for who we are—at our best or at our worst, warts and all.

Sam Shoemaker was an Episcopal Priest, who played a key role in establishing Alcoholics Anonymous—a fellowship of men and women who have a substance addiction and who needed the help and strength of others. His lengthy poem, a long-time favorite of mine, was obviously inspired by the 84th Psalm.

⁵ Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 82.

I Stand at the Door

By Sam Shoemaker (from the Oxford Group)

I stand by the door.
I neither go to far in, nor stay to far out.
The door is the most important door in the world –
It is the door through which [people] walk when they find God.
There is no use my going way inside and staying there,
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.
And all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where the door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind men,
With outstretched, groping hands,
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it.
So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world
Is for [people] to find that door - the door to God.
The most important thing that any [person] can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands
And put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks
And opens to a person's own touch.
People die outside the door, as starving beggars die
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter.
Die for want of what is within their grasp.
They live on the other side of it - live because they have not found it.
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,
And open it, and walk in, and find Him.
So I stand by the door.

Go in great saints; go all the way in -
Go way down into the cavernous cellars,
And way up into the spacious attics.
It is a vast, roomy house, this house where God is.
Go into the deepest of hidden casements,
Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood.
Some must inhabit those inner rooms
And know the depths and heights of God,
And call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is.
Sometimes I take a deeper look in.
Sometimes venture in a little farther,
But my place seems closer to the opening.
So I stand by the door.

There is another reason why I stand there.
Some people get part way in and become afraid
Lest God and the zeal of His house devour them;
For God is so very great and asks all of us.
And these people feel a cosmic claustrophobia
And want to get out. 'Let me out!' they cry.
And the people way inside only terrify them more.
Somebody must be by the door to tell them that they are spoiled
For the old life, they have seen too much:
One taste of God and nothing but God will do any more.
Somebody must be watching for the frightened
Who seek to sneak out just where they came in,
To tell them how much better it is inside.
The people too far in do not see how near these are
To leaving - preoccupied with the wonder of it all.
Somebody must watch for those who have entered the door
But would like to run away. So for them too,
I stand by the door.

I admire the people who go way in.
But I wish they would not forget how it was
Before they got in. Then they would be able to help
The people who have not yet even found the door.
Or the people who want to run away again from God.
You can go in too deeply and stay in too long
And forget the people outside the door.
As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place,
Near enough to God to hear Him and know He is there,
But not so far from [people] as not to hear them,
And remember they are there too.
Where? Outside the door –
Thousands of them. Millions of them.
But - more important for me -
One of them, two of them, ten of them,
Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.
So I shall stand by the door and wait
For those who seek it.
“I had rather be a door-keeper”
So I stand by the door.

Prayer

Loving God, who offers “life in all its fullness,” help us embrace this life, and help us, also, be sensitive to others who are looking for this life...and others who have found this life but need friends, real friends in their new home. Amen.

Psalm 84:1-12

1How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

2My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

3Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

4Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

5Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

6As they go through the valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

7They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

8O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!

9Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

10For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.

11For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

12O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.