

# *The Front Door*

*The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 1*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Matthew 7:7-12

<sup>7</sup>“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! <sup>12</sup>“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

1 Corinthians 16:5-11

<sup>5</sup>I will visit you after passing through Macedonia—for I intend to pass through Macedonia—<sup>6</sup>and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. <sup>7</sup>I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. <sup>8</sup>But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, <sup>9</sup>for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

<sup>10</sup>If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am; <sup>11</sup>therefore let no one despise him. Send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I am expecting him with the brothers.

While I was on vacation this summer, the Pew Research Center came out with a new report on why people say they attend worship services and why they do not. About ten of you sent me an article about it, so I figured I should pay attention, especially since I was on vacation and generally not going to church myself!

A lot of the data was already familiar. For example, people who do not believe in God tend not to go to religious services; and many folks say the reason they do go is mostly to please their spouse. You don't need to take a survey to figure that out. But some of the data does merit attention, because it continues to show up again and again. Far too many people say they have not felt welcomed when they have attended religious services. <sup>1</sup>

People are longing for a sense of community and they want to feel welcomed. When anyone comes through the doors of our church, it is the responsibility of all of us to be welcoming. Not just because we want to add to our number and increase the size of our already sizeable congregation. It is because our primary calling, as a community of faith, is to extend the radical hospitality of God.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find;” Jesus says in the gospel, “knock and the door will be opened to you.”

One biblical scholar says of this text that Jesus is seeking to replace a hesitant, bashful approach to God with bold, venturesome, even audacious faith. Jesus appears to be concerned about those who approach God timidly; who are afraid to communicate with God openly and honestly because they think of God as punitive and picture God as a kind of divine lion, ready to pounce. To the contrary, Knock, and the door to God's heart will be opened to you, Jesus says... God is a loving parent who promises good gifts to any who would come. <sup>2</sup> Then Jesus links God's generous hospitality to us: *Do to others as you would have them do to you* – that is the summary of what God expects of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Pewresearch.org

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion.

Have you ever noticed that the whole story of God’s hospitality and love for the human family is summarized on the front door to our sanctuary? If you read the archway up and around, from left to right, it begins with the first day of creation and then journeys thorough the whole biblical love story between God and God’s people – Adam and Eve, the covenant made to Noah never to destroy the earth, the Tablets of the Ten Commandments, the Law and the Prophets, and then when you get to the very top of the arch over the center of the doors - there is a baby. A baby, flanked by his parents Joseph and Mary, who leads us down the right side of the archway through the life of Jesus, the birth of the church, and finally to a symbol of the whole of creation gathered at the throne of God on the last day.

You cannot come into our church’s front door without passing through that story of God’s welcome, the whole history of God’s love for us! That also means we are called to leave through our church doors carrying that love with us when we go.

The word for *door* in the New Testament actually has three meanings. The first is simple – the same as in English a door through which one enters a space, or it can also mean the opening of a cave or a tomb. And then finally, this very same word for door in Greek means “an opportunity, a favorable time for accessing a possibility.”<sup>3</sup>

When we come into our church’s doors, we enter this amazing love story between God and us, and hopefully something transformative happens in our worship and communion here, so that, when we exit those very same doors, we seize every opportunity to share that love of God with the world.

That’s how the Apostle Paul ends his famous love letter to the church at Corinth. *I’m coming to visit! Paul writes to his friends there, and I hope to stay longer the next time... maybe I can spend the winter with you.* There are adversaries to the gospel over there in Corinth, as

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*, March 28, 2018.

there are here in Ephesus and in Macedonia... there are adversaries to the gospel in the world, Paul says, but there is also *a wide door for the effective work of the church.*

The very same door that welcomes us to the heart of God leads us into the world for the effective work of the gospel. Last Spring, when so much of our national attention was focused on the horrific and ugly trauma of children being separated from their parents at the border between the U.S. and Mexico, conservative columnist at *The New York Times*, David Brooks, wrote about a contrasting vision of hospitality and welcome.

His opening line began, “Some of the people who do the most good have a willingness to be radically changed,” and then he told a story about visiting a special community for children in northern Italy.

Thirty-five years ago, two brothers, one a famous Italian fabric designer and the other an eye surgeon, along with their wives, had found themselves successful but spiritually unfulfilled. Unable to understand the meaning of the suffering they saw around them, they went to a nearby priest who told them:

*Faith is not found in an intellectual system,  
but as an encounter with beauty.  
Faith is the beauty of a love story.*

Shortly, thereafter, the eye surgeon brother told the fabric designer and his wife, who themselves had decided not to have children, about an HIV infected child in the hospital, whose mother was dying. The couple remembered:

*Faith is not found in an intellectual system,  
but as an encounter with beauty.  
Faith is the beauty of a love story.*

And they decided to foster the baby, taking the child into their home. Soon, other children came along, and still more, and over the past three decades hundreds of children have been cared for and educated at *Cometa*. The name itself is a thing of beauty – Cometa means Comet – a heavenly body that leaves a trail of light behind.

That early, transformative discovery that *faith is an encounter with beauty*, pervades Cometa, now an expansive home and educational center for children in need. Brooks describes it, “If you or I had hundreds of kids running around there would be general chaos. But Cometa is beautiful. The gardens are immaculate and meticulously designed. The family homes are modest, but look like they came out of *Architectural Digest*. Every piece of furniture in the high school is colorful, elegant and unusual. One of the founders told Brooks, “Beauty educates. The children who come here often feel tossed aside. But beautiful surroundings here make them feel important, welcomed and cherished. If a toy breaks at Cometa, it is fixed right away. Likewise, every child is recoverable...”

Then, Brooks made sense of his own encounter with beauty at Cometa, writing: “In a world of distrust and betrayal, they assume there is beauty in each person and in every situation, so they lead with an almost unnerving level of hospitality.”<sup>4</sup>

That is a real life enactment of the story that surrounds the front door of this church. Because of God’s *unnerving level of hospitality* – from the beginning to the end, and particularly in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ we see *beauty* – in every person, in every situation – which leads us who make up the church to our own unnerving sense of hospitality.

Over lunch after worship today, you will be able to find all kinds of information about how we experience God’s radical welcome here at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church and how we can extend it into the world. There will be people who really want to share with you opportunities for your involvement and commitment: from Children and Youth to Senior Adults, you can learn about upcoming programs and classes. Deacons and our Caring Ministries team can tell you how we express God’s love and compassion. Church friends from Music and Fine Arts are eager to

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<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, “The Loving Place for Children that Assumes Beauty,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2018.

share how we enrich our Christian calling through beauty and holiness. And members from our Mission and Outreach committees will show you so many ways we carry God's love for the world into the world – among those in need of food and shelter and tutoring, who long for a safe environment, for justice and peace.

You can find exciting plans about the capital campaign and how we intend to renovate and revitalize our church campus to enhance our sense of hospitality, to improve accessibility, and better meet the needs of our expanding vision for discipleship. All of these opportunities, as well as the fun, food and fellowship are expressions – you see – of how we are called to be a community of welcome.

As our front door reminds us when we come into the church we enter an amazingly expansive love story between God and the human family; and when we leave we take that love with us in service to the world. For in a world of distrust and betrayal, we assume there is beauty in each person and every situation because of God's almost unnerving level of hospitality.

AMEN.