

**February 4, 2018**

**TEXT: Mark 1:29–39**

**TITLE: Public Witness, Private Faith**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

What are the rituals you do when you come home—whenever you open your door and cross the threshold into your house or apartment? Do you put your keys somewhere so you can find them again? Do you hang up your coat, change your shoes, check to see if there are any messages on the phone, pet the dog or cat if you have one? We all have rituals associated with coming home. For me, when I come home after work, I put down my things and change out of my “church clothes” into something more comfortable. Once I do that, my brain shifts, and I know “I’m home” and able to leave behind work and focus on what’s important with my family and where we live.

Doorways are important. That is why there is the Jewish tradition of placing a small reminder of faith on the right-hand side of doorways. You’ve likely seen these items—they are small plaques or containers called a “mezuzah,” which in Hebrew simply means “doorpost.” Most of them hold a small rolled-up parchment upon which is written the famous words from Deuteronomy 6—the passage known as the Shema: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.* A mezuzah reminds people of their covenant with God, how when they cross over the threshold going out into the world, they go as ones who trust the Lord. And when they return home and cross the threshold again, they remain under the care and loving protection of the God who made them. The tradition is to touch the mezuzah to remember this covenant whether we are coming or going.

We all have rituals when we come home. However, it must also be said that sometimes work follows us home. Sometimes the stress or problems of the world don’t stay outside the threshold, but follow us inside. In fact, sometimes the problems waiting for us at home are worse than what we dealt with out in the world. For some people who live alone, to come home means stepping into an isolation that is frustrating and depressing. Some people come home to relationships that are broken or abusive. Some step over thresholds into places where illness is the dominant reality inside those walls.

Jesus taught in the synagogue of Capernaum and then went to the home of Simon Peter. Peter was married—a detail some in the church routinely forget. As soon as Jesus and the group of disciples crossed the threshold of Peter’s house, the pressing reality was one of sickness. Peter’s mother-in-law lay ill in bed. In the gospel story, Jesus went to her, took her by the hand, and helped her up. By God’s grace and through the process of trusting Christ and receiving his strength, she was healed. Then she, along with others in the household, could now offer hospitality to their guests.

As the story continues, the sun set, marking the end of the Sabbath day. People could now move about freely—and many chose to bring to Jesus people whom they loved that were ill or possessed, wounded in body or spirit. Again the threshold of Peter’s house had to be crossed by Jesus. Inside Peter’s house, Jesus hopefully felt at home—

felt at ease as he had significant one-on-one encounters, first healing Peter's mother-in-law, and later perhaps talking with his disciples, listening to what was on their heart, having a simple meal with friends. But as the sun set, the same Jesus stepped out the door and offered to heal those who sought him out, offered to listen to what was on their hearts, offered to give them the bread of life—that their woundedness and isolation might be cured. Sure, the healing Jesus offered was important, but more important was the fact that the illnesses present in the crowd that day effectively barred them from normal community. It set them apart as cursed or broken or outsiders. Jesus' touch and mercy changed all that. He made it possible for them to step over a figurative threshold and re-engage with their community. And even though he was at work outside a literal house, he was welcoming them home at last.

In your worship bulletin is a copy of a painting by the wonderful Italian artist Caravaggio. It depicts two pilgrims, an older man and woman, who receive a vision of Mary holding the infant Jesus. Caravaggio was a groundbreaking artist, who moved beyond the old habits of formal portraits of saints and the Holy Family to much more realistic portrayals of people. In fact, this painting was criticized because of the dirty feet and soiled clothing worn by the two kneeling pilgrims. I love the setting of the painting. Mary and Jesus appear to have stepped out of the privacy of a home to graciously engage with two people seeking their favor at the threshold. There was life happening inside those walls—just as real life, not especially glamorous or tidy or expected, was happening right outside those walls. Yet Jesus was in both places—at home and, with an arm and a gaze extended to those before him, anxious to be at work in the world.



Mark chapter 1 describes how the adult Jesus taught in the Capernaum synagogue, openly, honestly, with an authority that astounded all who heard him. This is described in vs. 21-28, which was our focus last week and of which Heather spoke well in her sermon—reminding us that we too are to speak with authority, dismantling systems of oppression, stepping up and calling it like we see it as people of faith and followers of Christ. What the next verses (Mark 1:29-39) teach us is that the place for our faithful words and actions will always be a mix of public and private settings. Jesus taught publicly in the synagogue, then he went to a private home and healed Peter's mother-in-law. At sunset, Jesus stepped outside the home and healed the people gathered at the threshold. Early in the morning, Jesus went to a private place to pray—to recharge his

batteries and remember the core words of his faith: *The Lord our God is one, whom we should love with all our heart, soul, and might.* Yet even there, the threshold of private faith and public witness was close by. The disciples found him, interrupted him, and in response, Jesus said, “Let’s go once more into the world. Let us proclaim to all that the Kingdom of God is in their midst.”

Think of it this way: The house of Christian faith has a door that you enter. You turn the key and find in that space a welcome, a sense of peace. You are not judged. You are safe and at home. It is there that you put down your keys of control, set down the baggage you carry and with which you are heavy laden. It is there you can think, read, and remember: *God is our Lord whom we love with our hearts, souls, and might.* Yet every door has two sides to it. Every door straddles a threshold. We step out over that threshold to engage with the world around us. We notice others who come to our threshold—sometimes bearing gifts and smiles, sometimes bearing needs, pain and sorrows. The space outside the door may be crowded and untidy and imperfect, but there too we are close to God, who is the Lord, *whom we love with our hearts, souls, and might.*

That’s why I love Caravaggio’s image. Piety and personal faith are important. It is how we learn to listen with our heart to the assurances of God that we are known; we are loved; we matter. Private faith gives us strength to stand when a cancer diagnosis or lost job would keep us knocked down. Private faith gives us strength to fight back when an indifferent world walks past us with unseeing eyes or a racist, hurting world beats us down out of its own fears and woundedness. But private faith always exists in tandem with public faith, public witness. Because we are loved by God, we step over the threshold into God’s world. Because we are known, we go forth to know others—to hear their stories, hold their hands, to see them with open eyes and open hearts. Because our names have been called, we choose to say aloud others’ names—sometimes voicing the concerns through the slogans of the moment: #MeToo, #TimesUp, Black Lives Matter, Immigration Reform now—knowing that the poor and wounded of the world will always be with us; knowing that we are moving toward a horizon of God’s mercy and grace, and we can only reach that horizon by helping those in trouble along the way so that we all reach it together.

The two-sided door is an important metaphor for us. Private faith without public witness is just hollow piety. Public witness without private faith is just superficial activism. That is why we need to remember this good news: We always meet Christ at our thresholds. Whether coming or going, Christ is there. As we open a door, stepping into a place that may be safe, welcoming and home—or into a place that is empty, troubled and unsettling—Christ is Lord: The one calling us by name, taking us by the hand, serving as the host at our table offering us new life. And crossing our thresholds to head out into places of work, service, and laughter—or into crowds of wounded, anxious, hurting people—Christ is Lord: the Son of the Most High whom we love with our hearts, souls, and might, the one who says “Let us go into the world that together we may proclaim the gospel there also.”

Consider well the doors of your life. In all your comings and goings, your private faith and public witness, abide with Christ, go with Christ, and be at peace.

AMEN