



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***Crossing the Threshold***

*By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse*

*Sunday, May 3, 2020*

Perhaps it's a bit ironic that I want to talk about crossing a threshold when we are mostly sequestered in our homes, decidedly on just one side of the threshold. When I tell people I am the Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church they comment on the glass building, our fabulous music program, the sweeping ceiling, our many doors and of course our social justice work. Once people realize that I am not Frank Hall (and just to go on the record here, I consider that a great compliment) I will often hear people say, "oh yes, you are the church that does so much community outreach." Yep, that's us, Our Lady of the Left, who throws open her doors and lets so many people in, our only requirement that they embrace our values and make a donation.... Even when I explain that it's a little more than a wide-open tent all the time, people don't seem to care. It's that our doors are open to others that they remember.

But it was an interesting comment: Being known for doing community outreach when it is actually the community reaching into us. By throwing open our doors we are reaching out into the community, albeit more passively than perhaps we would like to admit. These days we are throwing open the doors of our virtual church wider than ever. And what a difference it makes! Crossing our digital threshold come hundreds of people each week, so much so that you can be assured that even when we go back to meeting more in person, we will be keeping our digital thresholds open for many more to cross.

Doors and their thresholds are powerful metaphors for a Spiritual life. In folk tales, your home is safe unless you invite the devil across the threshold – which also happens to be true of the police. They can't come in without a warrant unless you invite them. When I do a house blessing, I place salt over the threshold to keep love in and shut hate out. Which by the way is part of that beautiful hymn we sing each Homecoming, Hymn 1, "May Nothing Evil Cross This Door," which, in the last line we sing: "And though these sheltering walls are thin, may they be strong enough to keep hate out and hold love in."

Can you hear me? What a message for our time of pandemic and fear and suffering, that we find shelter in our homes, keeping love in. But here's the thing: It's not all love that is being kept in homes across America; there is pain as well, domestic abuse, estrangement,

loneliness. And there are so many, homeless most of all, that need a threshold to cross to find sanctuary from this storm.

Over thresholds we pass out into the world as well, a world which seems so tentative to us now. And over thresholds those who come searching for solace and a spiritual center find us, into the sanctuary of community, out and into relationships. "Walking out the door" indicates so much more than just moving your body, it could be a revolution of the soul, crossing the threshold of life. This pandemic will lead us over thresholds we can't even imagine.

So, the question I pose today is: What thresholds are you willing to cross? Whichever way you answer that question – and the answer depends on where you are in life – I do believe we need to step boldly over the thresholds that are holding us back.

Which way are you going? In to be fed, or out to feed? Indeed, which door are you going to choose? The virtual door here or, when we return, the physical door of our sanctuary -- remember our sanctuary. Some folks used to come out of the sanctuary on the side where I am not standing and slip out the back Jack, make their own plan Stan, and set themselves free. You can go out one side and directly to your car, or out the other to speak with me, about what a waste of time that sermon was. Or actually, you can go out into the meditation garden and be by yourself.

In one growing church I served, we met for many years in a college auditorium while we were building our new building. It had a big blue velvet curtain across the stage. Most days I half expected Monty Hall to come out to invite one lucky person to "come on down" and choose: "Door #1, A shiny new convertible, Door #2, a lifetime supply of hot dogs or, Door #3, everlasting life and complete cosmic consciousness. And then the contestant would hear all the shouting.

As enlightened as we are, I wonder what most of us would choose. I suppose if you were really hungry you might pick the hot dogs, but then who doesn't want a shiny car? But how many would choose everlasting life? Haven't many of us had just about enough? And where in those choices is the place of justice in life?

I am fully aware that for many of you, just stepping through our door virtually or otherwise is bold enough. That you come with hearts and sorrows and "broken skies," you come seeking an opening to the door of your struggles that keep us imprisoned, like the poet Jim Perkinson said, to "break God into your prison, so you can break out." Coming here to be healed and to find a community – talk about community outreach – is to engage in a new

and sometimes frightening spiritual passion. You risk a lot to cross our threshold and bear your soul, even if you never say a word. I see the tears in your eyes. I know the compassion you seek. And you are welcome here. Thank you for coming and allowing us to minister to you ... it's not an exaggeration to say that lives are saved when people boldly cross our thresholds.

As part of my spiritual direction these days, I am consulting the Christian Lectionary, that schedule of scripture by which, Christian Pastors preach on each given Sunday. It turns out that the Old Testament scripture for today, what is known as the third Sunday of Easter, is Psalm 23. You all know it,

23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (King James Version)

Here is a powerful message, that though we must all cross the thresholds of our lives, whether they are for justice or just to survive, we are truly not alone. The power of love, community, the embrace of our collective will, Spirit of Life, God or whatever you call your cosmic center, walks with you over the thresholds of our lives.

I am particularly taken with the fourth verse of the Psalm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." It's the valley of the shadow of death, not the valley of death, it's the realization that every crossing requires of us some courage against the evil of our lives and that we are truly not alone. "Thy rod and thy staff" is an illusion to the crook the shepherd carries, with a nook on one end to pull the sheep safely away from danger and the rod at the other end used to defend the sheep from predators. While I know UUs don't like to be

called sheep (or their ministers called “pastors”) there is comfort in knowing that we cross thresholds with others by our sides, seen and unseen.

When the time comes to cross a threshold, we must enter the valley as we see fit. In the Arthurian legend, King Arthur and all his knights are sitting around the big round table with nothing to do, the dragons all slain. Until Tristan, the most adventurous among them, has a most adventuresome idea. “Hey, I haveth an idea” proclaims he, “what sayeth you brave knights to a quest for the Holy Grail, the sacred chalice Jesus used, that promises eternal life.” Everyone agrees and so off they go in search of the Grail. But as they approached the dark forest – an ancient symbol of our fears and the mysteries of the Universe – they all realize that there is no path and that each must enter through the darkest part of the forest. To open the door to everlasting life and meaning, or to even surviving, we enter through our darkness into the wood. It takes courage and will to do this.

When I applied for my very first job out of college, I took three separate trips to the front door of the dean’s office before I walked through. Sure, I had thought I had something to offer as a research assistant, but ultimately, I was sent to the basement and began my post-college career by cleaning toilets in the janitorial department. Still those doorways can be dark, if you can even find the door. And it’s not easy to cross any threshold, is it?

How many are wandering around looking for our saving message even now? How many act with a desperate passion to find a church that doesn’t demand they believe, but invites them into the faith that rests in their own hearts? How many of your neighbors and friends? I am designating this month of May, bring a friend to virtual church month. It’s time to shine a little light on the path to our doors, to help bring people in.

As my colleague, Rev. Michael McGee puts it: “We give everyone who walks over our thresholds an incredible gift. It’s the gift of acceptance, of inclusiveness, of hospitality. Do you remember the first time you walked through our doors – or the doors of another Unitarian Universalist church – and felt that thrill of not having to conform to the expectations and dogma of others, and instead being invited to actually speak from the heart about your convictions and doubts and beliefs -- and to listen to and learn from everyone else? Do you remember what it felt like to finally be home?”

We are a faith that prides itself on opening doors that keep people apart. Our history as Unitarians is one of courageous people standing up to proclaim that our world is one, and that we should celebrate our differences and not be divided by them. Our history as Universalists is one of insisting that Love is our divinity, and our task is to reveal

compassion in all that we do.” (From “Bubbles and Bricks: Opening Doors, Building Bridges” preached UUCA, 3/15/09)

Once over the threshold it takes courage to stay and grow and eventually – eventually - feel strong enough to first hold the door open for others, and then step boldly back out across that threshold with the compassion of our convictions, and change the world. That’s the big brass ring of our faith: not to stop at the going in, but to step boldly back out into the world.

We can do this. We really can. I know so many of us are worried about the future. We are all worried. Yet, we are adapting, aren’t we. We are meeting more often now than ever before, crossing virtual thresholds all the time. I am so proud of the way our leaders have stepped up to invite others in. I am so proud of how creative we have become in our problem solving. I am so grateful for your generosity as we re-make our congregation into a responsive force for love in the communities we serve. Gender equity, anti-racism, anti-classism, open to generations from Boomers to Generation C and beyond. What a time to cross over this threshold my friends.

What a time indeed.

In fact, a time of firsts. I choose this year to begin a program of spiritual guidance as I take on an additional role as a spiritual director. Deeper than parish ministry, spiritual direction is a relationship of discernment wherein I work with people all over the country helping them deepen their spiritual lives. Wouldn’t you know that the retreats and practices that were to happen this spring and summer are all now online? So are my sessions with my new directees. And I am finding it exhilarating. To be up at 5 am and reading Buddhist sutras, and the meditations of 6<sup>th</sup> century Desert monks. I feel as if I am crossing a sacred threshold and I haven’t even left my house.

I have such plans for us in the years to come as we deepen our spiritual journey. Retreats, new classes and deeper spiritual experiences than we have ever imagined.

I do not believe we are as called to serve justice as we are to serve humanity and, in that service, to create justice. Justice by itself does not entice us over the threshold but relationships do. And when we know the person we are changing the world with, it won’t matter so much what they believe but that they believe in doing the right thing. I actually believe that is as close as we can come to knowing God in our lives: to feel the passion of caring with another, perhaps someone very different from us. I believe that God lives in the relationships we create and helps us break free of the prisons of heartache and hunger.

It takes passion to cross the thresholds of our lives to be healed, and it takes compassion to welcome others and go back into the world and help others. Even if we are afraid we can, and will, step boldly through the doors of the Spirit.

One of my favorite stories of this coming and going of the spirit comes from England. Portrayed in the movie “The King’s Speech”, King George VI suffered from a debilitating speech impediment that kept him from the official spotlight of his office especially as the second heir after his brother Edward VIII who abdicated the throne to marry an American divorcee, Wallis Simpson, leaving George the King of England. He himself almost abdicated but through the faith of his wife and his own passionate courage found the door to a speech therapist who actually helped him find his way.

In 1939, as England declared war on Germany, King George VI crossed the threshold into a small sound room in Buckingham palace and without a stutter delivered the following three-minute speech:

“In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself. For the second time in the lives of most of us, we are at war.

“Over and over again, we have tried to find a peaceful way out of the differences between ourselves and those who are now our enemies; but it has been in vain. We have been forced into a conflict, for we are called, with our allies, to meet the challenge of a principle which, if it were to prevail, would be fatal to any civilized order in the world.

“It is a principle which permits a state, in the selfish pursuit of power, to disregard its treaties and its solemn pledges, which sanctions the use of force or threat of force against the sovereignty and independence of other states...

“But far more than this, the peoples of the world would be kept in bondage of fear, and all hopes of settled peace and of the security, of justice and liberty, among nations, would be ended. This is the ultimate issue which confronts us. For the sake of all that we ourselves hold dear, and of the world order and peace, it is unthinkable that we should refuse to meet the

challenge. It is to this high purpose that I now call my people at home, and my peoples across the seas, who will make our cause their own. I ask them to stand calm and firm and united in this time of trial.

“The task will be hard. There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield, but we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God. If one and all we keep resolutely faithful to it, ready for whatever service or sacrifice it may demand, then with God's help, we shall prevail. May He bless and keep us all.” (The King's Speech of September 3, 1939)

The impact of the war upon the King, George VI, was incalculable. He died, at the age of 56. But the passion which he led his people through their darkest hour saved a nation and millions of lives.

It matters that we step boldly over the thresholds of our lives. It matters to you and to me. It matters to a world searching for answers and hope. So, I leave you with this question: What are the thresholds we are crossing now?