

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – January 24, 2021 – Another Door Opens  
Psalm 62:5-12 and Mark 1:14-20

Will Willimon previously served as chaplain of the Duke University Chapel. He writes, “One night, some years ago, a Duke fraternity invited me to give a talk. The dean requires them to have a certain number of programs each year in order to give fraternities some semblance of respectability. My assigned topic was ‘Character and College.’ I thought, ‘Lord, thou hast delivered them into my hands.’ I can’t believe that they are dumb enough to invite an old guy like me to talk to young guys like them on ‘character.’”<sup>1</sup>

“So I went to the fraternity section and knocked on their door. The door opened, and I was greeted by a young boy of about nine or ten, I imagined. ‘What is a kid doing over here at this time of night?’ I wondered. ‘Surely we have rules against young children in the dorm this late.’”<sup>2</sup>

“‘They’re waiting for you in the common room,’ he said. ‘Follow me. I’ll take you there.’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 1*. (Abingdon Press, 2017), 115.

<sup>2</sup> Willimon, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Willimon, 115.

“We wound our way back into the common room where the fraternity was gathered, glumly waiting for my presentation. As I began my remarks, I noted that the little boy climbed into the lap of one of the brothers. Shortly, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.”<sup>4</sup>

“Well, I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk, I asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So, I thanked them for the honor and made my way out. I heard the college kid say to the little boy, ‘You go on and get ready for bed. I’ll be in to tuck you in and read you a story.’”<sup>5</sup>

“When we stood just outside the door, the fraternity boy lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out.”<sup>6</sup>

“‘Let me ask you,’ I said, ‘Who was the kid there tonight?’”<sup>7</sup>

“‘Oh, that’s Darrell,’ he said. ‘The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom is on crack and having a tough time.’”

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<sup>4</sup> Willimon, 116.

<sup>5</sup> Willimon, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Willimon, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Willimon, 116.

Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it's okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff.”<sup>8</sup>

“‘That's amazing,’ I said, ‘I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible.’”<sup>9</sup>

“‘I'll tell you what's amazing,’ he said as he took another drag on his cigarette, ‘what's amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else.’”<sup>10</sup>

Friends, it is always interesting, isn't it, whom God calls? Ordinary people. People who don't have their lives completely sorted out. People who are deeply flawed and know it. Rarely have I met someone who wasn't at least a little bit confused about why God had chosen them for a particular purpose. Generally, people of faith recognize the incredible gap between where we are, and the awesome responsibility of where God wants us to be. And when we stop and think about God's call upon our lives, we realize that discipleship has a cost. That it often involves

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<sup>8</sup> Willimon, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Willimon, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Willimon, 116.

turning away from whatever we are pursuing in that moment, and embracing some new thing that God is doing in our lives.

I understand that it is a cliché to say that when one door closes another one opens. But it's often true, isn't it? As we look back at our lives, and at those transitional moments, especially, we are able to affirm God's presence and leading, even when those transitions were painful.

As you know, there are times when the door that closes actually seals so tightly that it becomes a barrier separating individuals from their loved ones. Many of you were either raised in homes in which your parents divorced or, later in life, have endured a divorce yourself. A number of you have lost spouses, sometimes far too soon. And, tragically, some of you have even suffered the death or estrangement of a child. There is deep and lasting pain in each of these experiences.

Life can feel unjust, and perilous, and fraught - just ask anyone who has been living in near constant isolation for much of the past year. In this age of pandemic, in which grief is as common as breath itself. And in the midst of so much anxiety and so much heartache, we are each personally aware of the cost.

It has now been over a year since I last saw my parents in-person. This has been the longest separation between us in my lifetime. In this respect, I know that I am not alone. And while I am exceedingly grateful that we are all in good health, and that no one in my family has become seriously ill or died as a result of Covid-19, the isolation that we have all experienced has been very, very painful.

By the time that I see them again, my parents will have missed two of Nathan's birthdays. The three-year-old boy that they saw last January will turn five in March. And when I speak on the phone with my mother, a woman whose career in business demonstrated her capacity to be as tough as she is tender, and I hear her voice falter, I know that this has been too much to ask. That the wait has been too long. That the pandemic has come with a cost.

Covid-19 didn't just shut the door. This disease slammed it. Our opinion was never consulted. We were just cut off, and forced us to deal with the fact that many of our in-person relationships would be severed for more than a year. A year! Could we ever have imagined?

As we consider the level of personal sacrifice that this virus has demanded, we begin to see how radical it was when Jesus appeared on the shoreline and said to

those first disciples, “Follow me.” James and John were there with their father, taking part in the family fishing enterprise. Immediately, they put down their nets, turned their backs on the family business, left the stability of family and friendship network behind, and committed to a life in which they would have no contact or communication with their father for months on end.

James and John did not even say “good bye” to their extended family. They simply left, taking nothing with them, in order to fulfill God’s call upon their lives. How difficult that must have been. For them, one door closed but another door opened. And they did what was required of them to journey with God in that moment.

Back in Durham, North Carolina, I wonder about little Darrell, tucked into bed by a fraternity boy still trying to find his way. And I think about the lessons that were being conveyed to each of them. About safety. And belonging. And purpose. It’s amazing, isn’t it, how God calls us? May it be so and all thanks be to God.