

## “The Doors Worship Opens”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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### Mark 9:30-37

<sup>30</sup>They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup>for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” <sup>32</sup>But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

<sup>33</sup>Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” <sup>34</sup>But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup>He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” <sup>36</sup>Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup>“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

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**H**ave you ever had one of those awkward social moments where you reach a door at the same time as someone else and it turns into one of those British comedy routines? You know, you say, “You first.” And the other person says, “No, you first!” maybe you say, “No, go ahead,” and he says, “please, be my guest.” Finally, you go in first and then you’re mad because somehow what started as a polite gesture somehow turned into a “Miss Manners” competition.

Of course, that’s not as uncomfortable as having doors closed on you. Some folks are old enough to remember the “whites only” signs at restrooms and lunch counters. Women in the workplace have had to overcome

the glass ceiling, which is just like a closed door. Older workers in our current economy are finding that ageism is a closed door. But closed doors aren’t just a workplace experience or even a social system injustice.

Spiritually, closed doors can leave us without hope, like dead men and women walking. I want to suggest to you that worship should be a door-opening experience. It should be a wide-door-opening experience. So let’s put on our exegesis glasses and look at this passage of Scripture to see what doors Christ opens for us.

When we first glance at these verses, they don’t appear to have anything to do with worship and they certainly don’t seem to be door openers. First of all, Jesus is talking about death.

That usually isn't much of a conversation starter, let alone a door-opener. He tells them that the Son of Man is to be betrayed, killed and then rise again. Mark says, "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." It appears this was a closed door for them. They either did not understand to whom he was referring, or if they did they did not see that as the open door they had imagined.

Mark then juxtaposes this conversation with one the disciples have about "who's #1?" I think we can relate to that conversation because that seems to be a major preoccupation for us contemporary western civilization types. From football polls to politics to economics we all seem to be wild about just who is the greatest. For most of us we think of how it takes power, prestige, and privilege to open doors.

David Galloway tells the story of a man who acted as if he thought he was the greatest. The man was born Abel Head Pierce, but everyone called him Shanghai, because at 6'4" he resembled that species of long-legged roosters. He was born in 1834, in New Hampshire but he evidently had a "Texas-sized" ego. So it was appropriate that at age 17 he decided to stow away on a ship headed for Galveston, Texas, to seek, as it were, his fame and fortune. He had 75 cents in his pocket.

He started in the cattle business by bartering a year's work for \$200 worth of cattle to begin his own herd. The next year he began branding stray cattle to build his herd. Before long, he

had a herd large enough to call himself a cattle baron. He dressed in brocaded vests and broad-brimmed, high-peaked hats. He even ordered his own gravesite statue prior to his death, reportedly so that he could enjoy looking at himself. Supposedly, at sunset he would lift a glass to toast himself – 'Here's to old Shanghai!'"

He decided to build a city with everything his employees needed right on his ranch. Shanghai would invite some of his friends from Boston to visit him on his ranch. He would give them the grand tour, bragging about all his accomplishments in developing his personal burg. They would ride through the streets in a buggy driven by two white horses, and Shanghai would point out the various buildings. "Over there's the commissary. Best in the territory. And over there's the school. Two rooms, not one. And over there's the livery with the best blacksmith in the state of Texas. And over there is the saloon. Finest whiskey on this side of the Mississippi." And the list went on and on, as Shanghai puffed out his chest like his namesake rooster.

Supposedly, as they continued on Shanghai's tour, one of his guests spotted the steeple of a church set in a group of mesquite trees. He asked his host, "Shanghai, do you belong to that church?" Shanghai spat out some tobacco juice and bellowed, "Heck, no! That church belongs to me."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Galloway, "Shanghaied," day1.org, September 24, 2006.

Of course a church is no more a possession than many of the things we say belong to us. Our children don't really belong to us as a possession. When Jesus places a child in the midst of the disciples he is making a profound object lesson, one that is symbolic and theological. He invites us to open a door to a different perspective on life. Instead of depending on our own ability to open doors by our own greatness or our own power, prestige, and privilege, Jesus once again challenges the values we may be living by. Let me suggest how I think worship opens a different, and ultimately a better, set of doors.

Worship first and foremost opens the door to God for us. When we enter into worship of God we affirm our desire to be in relationship with God. We affirm that we understand that we worship God, not the other way around. We express our hope that God will affirm His relationship with us. In a world that takes often strange and even perverse approaches to relationship-building worship is an open door to affirming our relationship with God.

Then I want to suggest that worship opens the door to help us celebrate different values and a different goal in life. When Jesus talks about his own suffering, betrayal, and death he invites us to open the door to approaching life with a different attitude than the "Shanghai's" of our world. Instead of celebrating our selves, worship invites us to celebrate sacrifice. Now I know this is nothing new to those of us that come to worship. I am not

really telling you something new. But what I am trying to do is inoculate you against the world's values. The world gets to impress its self-first values on us six days a week. For most of us Sunday worship is the one time a week we hear much about self-sacrifice instead of self-satisfaction. Worship opens the door to celebrating a different reality, a different set of values, a different life-style.

The third way that worship opens doors is that it takes this whole selflessness and self-sacrifice and shows us how it really is a more blessed way to live. When Jesus sets a child in their midst it is a symbolic statement that could be interpreted many ways. I want to suggest to you that in Jesus' day a child was the antithesis of power, prestige, and privilege. Yet, he says, that when we welcome such a one as that child we welcome the living Christ and the God who sends the living Christ into our midst.

For me, this says something about how we welcome not just children, but anyone who is without power, prestige, or privilege in our culture. Worship ought to open the door to the kind of relationship of nurture and gentleness with others in the same way we would want our children treated, after all everyone is a child of God. Worship ought to open doors that help us create safe space for those who are vulnerable to injustice and oppression the way children are.

A couple of weeks ago Nancy Ricker was teaching the young children in Sunday School. They were talking

about worship and she asked them if they knew what the sanctuary was. They didn't so she explained that it was the place we worship. A sanctuary opens the door for us to be in a safe space – a space to nurture our relationship with God and others. Children are a fitting symbol for us to remember when we want to better understand our relationship with God in worship. It is the self-sacrifice of good parenting that has taught me the most about God's love for me and my own self-first attitudes.

In contrast to “Shanghai,” the movie Mr. Holland's Opus, tells the story of Glenn Holland. Mr. Holland believes his life's work – his opus – is to write the next great American symphony. But he has to pay the bills. So he goes to work trying to teach music to high school students who are not very talented. The time and sacrifice of teaching, of trying to help others come to love music the way he does, leaves him little time to write his own symphony. Before he realizes it, decades have slipped away and the system is ready to discard him because they don't want to spend money on the arts – they aren't really important you know – and he is too old to do anything else. In essence, he has been betrayed, and is suffering the death of his life as he has known it. He suspects that he has wasted his life and sacrificed for nothing.

But in the closing scene, as he is leaving the school for the last time, his wife escorts him into the school

auditorium. Gathered there are students from all the years he has been teaching. They are waiting to celebrate his life. They are waiting as the celebration of his work. And they are waiting for him to conduct his great American symphony in public with a live orchestra for the first time. Of course, we realize as does Mr. Holland that his true opus, his true life's work, was the relationships he built with his students and his family as he shared his love of music.

Worship reminds us that God has opened the door to living for something other than ourselves and that is worth celebrating. Our real purpose, our real work, our real opus is to write a symphony of sacrifice and service in celebration of our relationship with God. God invites us to know that the door is open. He is waiting to welcome us into that relationship that brings real meaning to our life's work. In worship we celebrate God instead of ourselves – it is a radical move in a world that tells us constantly that life is about celebrating ourselves. It is a very different door, but that is the door that worship opens. It is the door to real life. AMEN.