

Standing at the Threshold... Again

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*Here, on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, and into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope—
Good morning. —Maya Angelou*

Readings: Genesis 12:1-9
Hebrews 11:8-12

On the eve of this new year before us, at this beginning of this new era in our ministry together, and during our celebration of the new life being born among us, I'm reminded that a large portion of our lives, it seems, is spent *one the verge*, at the door, but not quite over the threshold, bound up to yesterday unable to grasp tomorrow.

In a letter to high school graduates, Will Willimon, then a professor at Duke Divinity School wrote:

You've spent you whole life standing at the door, learning how to say good-bye.

As a toddler, your parents left you at the door of the nursery. You fought back the tears, bravely trying to wave to them as they left you there.

Then there was that first day of school. They walked you as far as the school bus stop, hugged you, and you were gone.

Then there was your first time at summer camp, you first visit to far away friends on your own... and now this, leaving home after graduation.

We call it graduation or commencement, which are fancy words for that by now familiar experience of standing at the door and saying good-bye.

Life is continual graduation, continual standing at the door and saying "good-bye." There is always another doorway to walk through; there is always another threshold to cross. Which one are you approaching at this point in your life?

In my experience, it is easy to view our current threshold as the final or ultimate one: "If I can just hold on and graduate, then I'll be set. I'll have no other hurdles

to jump.” Or “If I can only get that job, everything will be O.K. It will be easy street, and I can glide through life.” But the truth is there’s always another threshold to cross. The journey of faith and meaning never stops no matter how old we are. We cannot retire from it. Abraham was 75, it says, when he and Sarah found another threshold to cross.

But we love clean endings—a couple is united in love, good triumphs over evil, there is a nice, clear resolution of the plot. And we know that life is rarely like this. In the real world there is unfinished business, there is a lot of unfulfillment. And so we must learn to *come to terms with incompleteness*. Life is incomplete; it is a work continually in progress; there are always loose ends.

There’s a Sufi Story of when Mulla Nasrudin was an old man looking back on his life. He sat with friends in the tea shop telling his story.

When I was young I was fiery—I wanted to awaken everyone. I prayed to Allah to give me the strength to change the world.

In mid-life I awoke one day and realized my life was half over and I had changed no one. So I prayed to Allah to give me the strength to change those close around me who so much needed it.

Alas, now I am old and my prayer is simpler, “Allah,” I ask, “please give me the strength to at least change myself.”

There is incompleteness, and we must learn to come to terms with it.

Many of us are standing at a threshold right now—poised to cross over to a different life, a new world.

You could say that this whole congregation is standing at a threshold right now. A new era in its ministry is emerging. What will it look like? In which directions will this church move? What kinds of things is God calling us to do?

I certainly feel myself crossing over a threshold. Jenn and I have said “good-bye” to many good friends, to a routine and familiar way of life. And we are now with a bunch of folks that we are only beginning to know. What will be the focus of our ministry together? Oh, I have some ideas, but right now the picture is fuzzy and unseeable.

Exactly 10 years ago, as I began a ministry with another congregation I stood before the m the way that I’m standing before you now. That congregation had adopted a risky stance of open acceptance of gay and lesbian members into the full life and ministry of the church. This was in *open contradiction* to the policies of their denomination, the Presbyterian Church. I told them this:

What eventually is going to happen to us and other congregations that have taken positions in direct opposition to the General Assembly? Will we be dissolved? Will we be accepted and allowed to stay? It is a difficult and scary place to be—standing at this threshold.

Sadly, that congregation later changed its mind and went back into the closet regarding their practices after I was put on trial. And that denomination still has not fully crossed that threshold to allow a new way of being in congregations, and it has been unable to leave behind certain vestiges of the past in order to allow some to be blessed by God's grace anew.

About 20 years ago I read an article (1/10/90, *Sojourners*) by Jim Wallis in which he called the church to cross a threshold. He said that it is not the church that is changing, but our *culture*. With the help of television, consumption has become our highest cultural value and social purpose. Materialism has become the culture in America.

Now, we are all too aware of the problems of drugs and inner-city crime. Eight year old children selling crack with thousands of dollars in their pockets. But Wallis says,

Drugs are not the only narcotic here. The money that comes from drugs is the addiction that is leading to violence. That addiction—the addiction to materialism—is fed every hour of every day in this society... images dance before us every waking moment. The images attract, lure, create desire; they awaken greed and covetousness of our worst selves. Our children are glued to the T.V. screen; the beat of incessant consumption beats in their ears. Shopping malls have become the temples, shrines and communal centers of modern America.

And so, after creating this addiction, the poor are blocked from its satisfaction. And often they will do anything to fill this hunger. And Wallis' point is that the violent underside hasn't turned away from "traditional American values," but it *has embraced* the current American values. And the crisis of our inner-cities will not change *until we all change*.

And what Wallis and others have been saying is that despite our captivity in a culture of greed and covetousness, despite our exile in the new Babylon, a *new beginning* can happen in the American church, something akin to another Reformation.

We all know about the first Reformation. It was at a time when the church had forgotten important insights of the gospel, and in forgetting, had become comfortable and complacent. So God raised up people to speak the word that had been forgotten. The central insight of the Reformation was this: God's grace and acceptance is unconditional, unearnable, and radical.

Today there may be a new Reformation beginning, and its central insight is this: The gospel is good news to the poor. Yet, we live in a harsh climate that tempts us to forget this truth.

For a generation of prosperity, while Wall Street set record after record, Main Street languished, and became strewn with poor and homeless persons.

The gap between the rich and the poor continued to grow in spite of record earnings by corporations and low unemployment rates. They were “the best of times and the worst of times.” Meanwhile, most of us in the middle had wages that were stagnant or barely keeping pace with the cost of living. The top 1% came to own over 40% of the wealth, while the bottom 90% came to own only 30% of the wealth.

A striking symbol of our times is the comparison between the incomes of the average worker with the average CEO. In 1965, CEO’s made about 24 times the average worker. In 1980 this had risen to 42 times. In 2005 this had risen to about 500 to one.

Now, in the aftermath of an economic meltdown, we approach another threshold—and hesitate. Current economic disparity now exceeds that of the Great Depression. And unlike that earlier economic catastrophe, we have not yet crossed the threshold of reform to institute policies for substantial correction and redistribution. And so we have double digit unemployment, falling wages, bankrupt state budgets and foreclosures continuing at their record pace. Banks that received bailout money award their executives bonuses while there is talk of a “jobless economic recovery.” The gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to grow, prompting Harvard law professor and chairperson of the congressional oversight panel on the bailout money, Elizabeth Warren, to warn that the middle class—the true engine of economic health and growth—may become a thing of the past.

And so our age continues to be characterized by

- corporations competing for precious public money and tax breaks
- mergers and bailouts
- cuts in education, welfare and programs for the poor
- corporate restructuring and outsourcing
- rise in part-time, temporary and contract work without benefits
- “I’ve-got-mine-you-get-yours” and “winner-take-all” attitudes

A while ago I heard Bill Moyers read an excerpt from *The American Conservative* magazine about our growing inequality:

The holders of great wealth, especially if they are organized into a political lobby of similar holder of great wealth, can buy not only more goods, more

capital and more people. They can also buy (through the vehicle of campaign contributions) more important people: politicians and other public official and therefore public policies.

“The result of great wealth buying public policies,” observed Moyers, “is a positive feedback loop, or perhaps a vicious cycle, which transfers ever greater wealth and power to the very rich and away from everyone else.”

It seems to me that Moyers is right, and that the only way to break this cycle and bring fairness back to America is to “break the stranglehold of private money over politics.”

Why am I telling you all this? Well, because in the midst of our captivity to the callous and selfish values of the day, we believe in a new beginning! We stand at the threshold as a nation and dare to hope that a new birth is possible. And we’ll call this birth, “Emmanuel, God with us.”

Listen to what Martin Luther King wrote (*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*) that is even more relevant today:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes as a result of automation while profits of the employers remain intact and say “This is not just...”

America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing to prevent us from paying adequate wages to schoolteachers... There is nothing but a lack of social vision to prevent us from paying an adequate to every American citizen whether he be a hospital worker, laundry worker, maid or day laborer. There is nothing except short-sightedness to prevent us from guaranteeing an annual minimum—and livable—income for every American family.

King wrote this over 40 years ago, but it easily could have been written yesterday.

*A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but... **one day the whole Jericho road must be transformed** so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that **an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.***

The beginning of a new year is before us. And we have thresholds waiting for us to cross over—thresholds for this congregation, for us individually and for this nation—separate, yet certainly all related.

It is a difficult and scary place to be, standing at a threshold. We say “good-bye” and turn. We then enter an unknown future and say, “Hello! Good morning!” There is exhilaration and perhaps some dread.

Standing at the threshold is a scary because we risk failure and defeat. But if we expect perfection, then we will hesitate to cross over any threshold. If we are going to wait for *guaranteed success*, then we'll do nothing!

And so as we stand before the door, what shall we say? “Relax. You don't have to get it right. You'll make mistakes. But that's O.K. Cross over. Cross over anyway.”

In the Letter to the Hebrews, it says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as his inheritance; and he set out, *not knowing where he was going.*”

Abraham and Sarah surely were apprehensive about what lay ahead for them in this strange, unknown land. Yet they journeyed in faith. They didn't know what the future held, yet they were somehow confident. And they believe in a new beginning, a new birth, God with us.

And so do we.