

First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Burlington, Vermont

Date: July 28, 2013, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Burlington, VT
August 11, 2013, New Alpha Missionary Baptist Church

Title: “Opening the Door at Midnight”

Pastor: The Reverend Peter Cook

Scripture Readings: Luke 11:1-13

1He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” 2He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. 3Give us each day our daily bread. 4And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” 5And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ 7And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ 8I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. 9“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

We begin our reflection with a knock on a neighbor’s door at midnight. Surely the neighbor thought, “I am tired, I am in bed. My kids are in bed. And who has the gall to be knocking on my door at midnight? Don’t’ bother me.”

In a Middle Eastern culture, the story of the neighbor’s rudeness would have been a little shocking. That is because there is such a premium placed on the importance of hospitality. But Jesus told this story to validate the sense of hopelessness people can feel when they knock on the door and nothing is offered. The man kept knocking on the door, and the neighbor would not get up. He was tired and maybe even scared, and it was midnight.

Martin Luther King, in his famous sermon on this text, *A Knock at Midnight*, said there was a midnight in our world today. He thought it was midnight in the social order, the psychological order and the moral order.¹

We struggle with midnight in our world today. The look and feel of midnight is a little different now than it was in 1958 when King preached his sermon, but it is a reality all the same. So let us be bold now and say that it is midnight within the social order.

In our world today, we have invested trillions of dollars in our security. With the images of 9/11 and other acts of terror emblazoned in our minds, we have too often turned to war to squash any threat and to head off any act of terrorism without weighing the immediate and long term cost. We have invested vast amounts of money in weaponry, and yet these investments have been vastly out proportion to what was required to counter the real threat being posed. Sometimes these weapons, like the F35 fighters actively being promoted in our area, are even deemed ineffective or unnecessary by some circles in the military and some congress people of both political parties. And still we continue spending billions of dollars, because it is a project which is too big to fail. Weaponry too often becomes an inappropriate tool for economic rebirth and job creation. After two enormously costly wars in terms of money and injuries, one cannot help asking if we have needlessly entered conflicts to subsidize these military industries while not resorting to more peaceful economic and diplomatic approaches.

All the while, in the age of sequestration, we cut very little from these programs but cut very deep into the salaries for military personnel and their benefits. In Washington, we cry poor whenever money is needed to invest in our schools, our roads, or other endeavors which will have a better impact on the world economy and make us stronger while offering others hope through non-violent means. If we raise our voice against the military industrial complex, as the Republican president Dwight Eisenhower did so many years ago, or against war profiteering, as did Democratic President Harry Truman, our patriotism is questioned. Not wanting to be seen as unpatriotic, we cower in fear and stop asking the tough questions. We just go along to get along.

It is midnight in the social order.

It is also midnight within the psychological order. In so many ways, we are bombarded 24/7 with media stories and narrative where we are taught in subtle and not so subtle ways that if we just had more money, a better sex partner, a faster car, a new drink, a magic pill, or a new exercise machine to tone our abs, we would find un-paralleled joy. These promises offer to fill a great emptiness in our souls. But these promises leave us wanting. It seems that the more and more we consume the emptier we feel. Social commentators and preachers don't help the problem. Pastors, who should know better, preach a prosperity Gospel where we tell people that if they are rich, they are blessed by God. But if people are poor, God has not blessed them because they have just not tried hard enough.

Tragically, many churches have become social clubs or entertainment centers where we spend our days chasing around disinterested people offering some spiritual crumbs, hoping that something will finally catch the interest of the consumer who can choose from a menu of options on any given weekend. Many preachers are just scaredy-cats who never bother to give real bread by being honest with people. They fail to say that joy does not come from more and more consumption for ourselves. Instead, we discover a true joy by giving of ourselves to others. We seem to suggest that the purpose in life is to avoid criticism by doing nothing, being nothing and thinking nothing. King said some preachers have been all too tempted to revise Jesus words, to

say “Go Ye into all the world, keep your blood pressure down, and lo, I will make you a well-adjusted personality.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is midnight in the psychological order.

And it is also midnight in the moral order. So many political decisions today are made by politicians who watch poll numbers with little regard for what might be the morally right thing to do. We live for the next election. For example, in our world today, we can barely dip our toe into a discussion about racism without getting burned or scorned. It goes ok for a few minutes or a few days when the political winds seem to be blowing our way. But it is not long before so many of us recoil in fear when someone tries to explain their pain and reality which is so different than what we can imagine. In our post-racial society, where we assume we are beyond racism, we need to have the political courage to admit that racism is still a strong reality today. For instance, one of the most egregious new forms of racism in America can be found in the new caste system for black men.

In her book, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, the law professor, Michelle Alexander, tells us that black men are disproportionately imprisoned compared to other populations. Moreover, many black men, because of felony counts even for minor drug and non violent offenses, are branded for life once they accept prison or a plea deal. A felon is disproportionately denied access to housing, the right to vote, to access to a job upon their release, even though they have already more than paid their debt to society.ⁱⁱⁱ We institutionalize hopelessness. And we might also ask why we are more than willing to build more prisons to maintain this caste system, but invest so few resources in communities and schools which would keep people out of prison in the first place.

The new Jim Crow gets stronger and stronger while white people, with more resources, manage to skate around the law and not experience the same punishment. These injustices continue as we spend endless hours parsing the words of those who muster the courage to speak up. After the verdict in the Trayvon Martin trial, the media engaged in subtle forms of character assassination which limited discussion and distracted us from hearing truth or really listening to people’s pain. The President even tried to open up the discussion but found his words trivialized by some commentators saying that he pulled the race card while not looking at their own racism. The New York Times quoted a complaint that such remarks by the president betrayed “the great achievement of our society, the possibility of not talking about race.”^{iv}

It is midnight in the moral order.

Now I give these examples not to discourage us in any way or even to have us all agree, because that would be an impossible task. But it is my aim to encourage us as disciples of Jesus Christ to think more deeply about these challenges which are ever present in our personal and communal lives. Amidst the midnight of our society, Jesus fortunately offers us a path through the predicament we find ourselves in.

He begins his parable by offering the Lord's Prayer. He says to us, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." For Jesus, through prayer, we are not made helpless victims. Instead, prayer empowers us to be persistent and ask God for our daily bread or what we need to make the world a more just place. It helps us get through times of trial. When we are confronted with midnight, we must be persistent and keep knocking on that door even if it seems the owner of the house has fallen asleep and refuses to get up.

In Rio a couple of weeks ago, Pope Francis spoke to 30,000 young Argentine pilgrims to offer an alternative to the prosperity gospel propagated by so many churches in that part of the world. To an enthusiastic crowd he said:

"I want you to get out on the streets and make trouble [make noise, act up, give people fits], I want there to be acting up in the diocese, you should go outside, the Church ought to get out onto the street, abandon its worldliness, its comfort and its clericalism and stop being preoccupied with ourselves [closed, focused on our own concerns]."

Then he turned meaningfully toward the prelates [bishops] who accompanied him and said to them. "I hope the bishops and priests will forgive me if the young people give them headaches, but that's what I advise them to do."^v

This is the Pope now. It was a refreshing sermon offering a powerful alternative to the intense focus on institutional preservation in the church which has left so many people discouraged feeling it is midnight and there is no bread. The Pope invites us to persistently bang on the door and do something.

I so believe that there will be bread and the morning will come when we become less preoccupied with our security and lovingly devote ourselves to a life of prayerful, persistent and just action. I think the Pope has hit the right note and many people are responding in kind. How is it that we will open the door at midnight in the church to seek the Kingdom of God and offer bread to the hurting World? I have three thoughts.

First, I think that we need to create a space for the free expression of ideas. Upstairs in our dining hall, there is an iconic Norman Rockwell print of a man making his point at a town meeting. Town meetings took place in meeting houses in New England, which also functioned as places where people worshipped. We value the full expression of ideas as part of what it means to be faithful. The purpose of conversation and debate is not to arrive at complete agreement, but surely real consensus will not emerge unless there is room for robust reflection and dialog. Our comfortable stasis needs to get jarred for change to happen. The church can and must offer spaces where we can freely and deeply look at the big questions and the real challenges. In God's kingdom, there is enough love for us to create spaces for us to talk about some tough things and not be distracted by fear and intimidation.

So for instance, I would respectfully wish to ask about our priorities as a country and community where we support the construction of the F35 which costs about 140 million dollars per plane. One plane costs nearly 11 times the entire city budget for Winooski. This plane puts out noise 4 times louder than the F16. Because of the four fold increase in sound, according the Air Force's Environmental Impact Study, up to 3,410 households with 7,719 people including 1,224 low income and 856 minorities, could be adversely affected and see their home values drop because they would be rendered unfit for residential use.^{vi} Somehow the promise of the F35 has become a substitute for a real economic and business plan. And what is that plan anyway? Do our kids, the elderly, the homeowners, and those struggling to find a home or stay in their home get a share? Do the poor and people of color which will disproportionately be affected by this basing get a voice in the creation and implementation of that plan? If you don't know much about this, I would urge you to study up because the basing of these planes could have an enormously adverse affect on our community and could particularly affect lower income communities.

Second, we must level with each other and say that salvation does not come from consumption. The emptiness of our souls is not filled by consumption. The medicine for emptiness comes from giving of ourselves to others. I think so many people struggle with a lack of purpose in their lives. We must not become passive. Instead we must be powerful agents for good and change in the world. As a church we must appeal to people's better angels and call people of all ages to a higher sense of purpose.

I met with Roy Hill, who is here with us this morning at New Alpha, earlier this week. I love Roy, and feel he is really a prophet among us. Roy told me a story about this pastor who was invited to interview at an inner city church. As the pastor approached the church he noticed that the Deacon had to unlock the high gate that surrounded this inner city church so that they could get in. The pastor met with all the parishioners who were enthusiastic about his candidacy. They offered him a big salary and many perks along with the status of being pastor of this big church. But after prayer and reflection, the pastor turned down the offer of the pastorate because he said he could not serve a church which locked its gates to the community. That gate effectively blocked out all these people who might have banged on that gate looking for a little bread including the bread of life. He set aside his need to say he served a prestigious church and instead listened to Jesus' words that if you want to find your life you must lose it for my sake.

And finally, the church must be a place that seeks to honor the experience of each person and does not discriminate. The church has a vision of the kingdom where each person can find their voice and where we have a holy impatience with injustice. For instance, one of the harder conversations regarding discrimination is about how we offer hope to prisoners upon their release while all the while asking how we can prevent people from becoming prisoners in the first place. If we believe in redemption, why is it that we tell a discharged prisoner to get their life together, so they are not a burden on society and then immediately move to deny them access to housing, the right to vote, and a path to a job? We then wonder why it is that some, out of

despair, may commit another crime to go back to prison where they can at least get food and shelter. This is cruel. It is hard to reconcile such an approach with a Gospel which offers hope to the poor and the outcast and holds up the promise from the Lord's Prayer that people may receive bread, forgive and be forgiven, and may reasonably aspire to a life which is consistent with the Kingdom of God values. We must lift our voice, cut through the lore of our post-racial society which says we have moved beyond race, and have the courage to say that racism is alive and well and we must do something about it. We should support rather than shun people who name racial injustice and have the guts to keep banging on the door until someone listens and gets out of bed to help.

It was midnight and that man could have walked away and been discouraged when he kept knocking and no one answered. In fact that is what so many people end up doing. But as Disciples of Christ, we must be persistent and knock on the door or get out of our beds. We must not provide scorpions and snakes of cynicism, fear, deceit, denial, and despair to our children but instead provide the bread of hope, love, justice, truth telling, and forgiveness which this broken world so much needs and desires. We must demand that the door opens at midnight.

ⁱ King, Martin Luther, Clayborne Carson, and Peter Holloran. "A Knock at Midnight." In *A knock at midnight: inspiration from the great sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* P. 65 to 83. New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* 67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press; 2010. Michelle Alexander was interviewed on Democracy Now. These two video segments offer an excellent overview of her thinking about the racial caste system in America for black men. http://www.democracynow.org/2010/3/11/legal_scholar_michelle_alexander_on_the

^{iv} Taylor Branch, "Remembering the March." *USA Weekend*, August 16, 2013, 9.

^v AP Barchfield, / Jenny, Marco Sibaja, and Nicole Winfield. "Pope Francis Urges Catholics to Shake Up Dioceses | TIME.com." *World | International Headlines, Stories, Photos and Video | TIME.com*. <http://world.time.com/2013/07/25/slum-pope-tells-slum-residents-not-to-lose-hope/> (accessed August 20, 2013).

^{vi} "Learn More » Stop the F-35." *Stop the F-35 » Protect Vermont*. <http://www.stopthef35.com/resources/> (accessed August 20, 2013).