

Who's That Knocking at My Door?

Revelation 3:15-22

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The Rule of Benedict is a document that has ordered the life of Benedictine monks for 1500 years. That remarkable document, written by Saint Benedict of Nursia, instructs the monks in how they are to live their daily lives together in community. One of the things that Benedict describes is a particular role, the “porter” of the monastery. Quite simply, the porter is the one who opens the door to the monastery when someone knocks. Not much of a role, you say? Ah, but there is so much to it, so much entailed, and so much communicated in how one opens a door. Roman Catholic nun and author Joan Chittister goes so far as to say, “The way we answer doors is the way we deal with the world.”

In the Rule of Benedict, the porter is given very specific instructions. He is to sleep near the entrance to the monastery so he can hear and respond in a timely way when someone knocks. Then, as soon as anyone knocks, likely a poor person because they often sought refuge in monasteries, the porter is to reply, “Thanks be to God,” or “Your blessing, please.” That’s before he even knows who is on the other side of the door. Before the porter knows who that person is or why he or she is there, he is to praise God for that person’s presence and to ask for the person’s blessing. Isn’t that remarkable?

Dorothy Parker, the author who was famous for her dark wit, used to answer her telephone with this greeting: “What fresh hell is this?” Most of us don’t respond in that way, but I do know a pastor who says that when he started out in ministry, when he would go into his office and see that little red light on the phone that indicates that he had a message, his first response was something like “Uh-oh.” He anxiously wondered what need was being brought to him and whether he could meet it. And he would have to collect himself a bit before he could pick up the receiver and listen to the message. Gratefully, he got over that response, but I don’t think he has yet gotten to the point that when he sees that little red light on the phone, he says, “Thanks be to God.”

Well, what do you think when someone knocks on your door? Is it closer to “What fresh hell is this?” or is it closer to “Thanks be to God?” Probably somewhere in between, right? But which way do you lean?

Benedict goes on to say that the porter should be prepared to respond whenever there is a knock at the door. It could be in the middle of the night or when the porter has just sat down to eat. The porter is to be welcoming at all times and not just when it is convenient. The porter is to offer a welcome, in Benedict’s words, “with all the gentleness that comes from reverence of God,” and “with the warmth of love.” And then the porter is to make sure that the other monks know of the presence of a visitor in their midst so that they can join in extending a welcome.

Can you begin to see why I say there is a lot to this role of being a porter? You know, there are people in our congregation who play that role. They may not have the title of “porter,” but they play that role. They are quick to extend a welcome, and

they know how to communicate that they receive a newcomer's presence as a gift, as surely as if they were to exclaim "Thanks be to God." What an important role. Some days I think it is the most important role of all.

Some communities—perhaps by taking the lead of their official or unofficial porters—radiate a kind of welcome that receives visitors as gifts, no matter the circumstances. Particularly when you are in need, perhaps nothing is more life-giving than that kind of welcome.

I remember once when I was in seminary, I was driving with a couple of friends in the beautiful and genteel countryside of northwestern Connecticut. My car broke down. It was always breaking down in those days. It was a time before cell phones—some of you will remember that there was such a time—so I needed to find a phone. I went up to the nearest house and knocked on the door. I could hear a lot of conversation and laughter coming from the house. The man who opened the door—who had never seen me before—did not step outside to speak with this stranger, did not stand in the doorway while I stood outside. Instead, his first words to me were, "Please come in." He did not know me. He did not know why I was there, but he immediately said, "Please come in." I remember being quite struck by that, taken aback, really. When I stepped inside and told him about my car problem, he let me use the phone. When I got off the phone, I thanked him, and he asked how long before the road service truck would get there. I told him, "They said about half an hour." He responded, "Well then you might as well join the party. Can I get you a glass of wine?" When I explained that I had two friends back in the car, he said, "Well, bring them in."

So my friends and I joined the party. When the road service arrived and the car was revived (as I recall, it just needed some kind of belt), I went back to the house to thank our host. He said, "Oh, but please stay for dinner." And then I noticed that my friends already had plates in their hands. It was like we were expected all along. By the way, it was soon after we joined the party that we learned that this was a gathering of a Bible study group from the local Episcopal church. That was over thirty years ago. But you don't forget a welcome like that.

Some households are like that. The home in which I grew up was a welcoming one, but my parents always liked to be prepared for visitors. When I was in high school, if I told my mother that a couple of friends were going to come over to, say, watch a hockey game on TV, she would have sodas laid out on the kitchen counter with a bowl of potato chips with plastic wrap over the top to keep them crisp. She would peak in the room where we were watching the game and greet my friends, but not stay very long, which, as teenage boys, we probably thought was just about right. So she had a wonderful welcoming way. But not so much when visitors came unannounced. When, say, one of my friends just showed up, just knocked on the door, both of my parents were just a little bit thrown by that. Just a little, but enough that I could sense it, and perhaps my friends could also.

Is that why in high school we always seemed to gravitate toward David Blair's house? That was the gathering place. If you didn't know where my friends and I were, it would be a safe bet that we would be at David Blair's house. Why was that? Quite simply because his parents were like porters. It was like they were always expecting you to knock on the door (when we even bothered to knock). They made it seem like there was no such thing as an inconvenient time and that your presence was not a burden, but more like a gift.

So I think of the porter in the monastery and the people who play that role in this congregation, and I think of the host who welcomed three young strangers like treasured guests at his party, and I think of David Blair's parents. And I wonder why more of us are not like that. I wonder what prevents us from responding to a knock on the door by saying "Thanks be to God."

Well, to state the obvious, most of us don't like interruptions. We would rather live our days by our own plans. I try to imagine someone asking me, "Could I interest you in an interruption today?" I might respond, "No, thank you. Being interrupted is not on my list of things to do today." I say that by way of confession, of course, because I recognize that interruptions are one of God's preferred ways of getting our attention. The origin of the word interrupt is helpful here. It is derived from two Latin words: *inter*, meaning "between," and *rumpere*, which means, "break in."

We usually experience interruptions as our routine *breaking up*, when it may be that God is trying to *break in* to our lives. Interruptions can be God's way of breaking in between our moments, breaking in between our harried rushing from this to that, breaking in between our rigid expectations. Sometimes a knock on the door is that kind of interruption. And so the porter says in response, "Thanks be to God."

Father Theodore Hessberg reflected on his experience as the president of Notre Dame University by noting that when he started in that role, he was so impatient with students and faculty who, by knocking on his door, were continually interrupting his work. That response lasted until he realized that the interruptions *are* his work. Well, that's not only true of university presidents, but it's also true of pastors, and it's true of Christians, all of us. Interruptions are our work. "Thanks be to God."

And we probably also have a hard time receiving a knock on the door with immediate thanksgiving because the one who arrives may not be the one we expected. It may be a stranger whose ways are indeed strange to us. That requires something like adjustment. To truly receive a guest, to make room for that guest, requires that we adjust our routines and our expectations.

Sometimes that stranger that requires that kind of hospitality is a member of our own family. One father I know, when the contours of his daughter's personality began to emerge, said, "It's like we welcomed a stranger into our house, a stranger who didn't come from the outside, but from inside." We may be able to choose to have children, but we cannot choose the children we have. Often the one we are asked to receive is not the one we expected. Perhaps that's why the porter doesn't even wait to see who is knocking on the door before declaring, "Thanks be to God." That way it is clear that the word of thanks is offered unconditionally. That way it is clear that you are not asking the stranger to change or be somehow different before a word of thanksgiving can be offered.

A pastor friend of mine served a church where there was declining membership, so he prayed for new members to enliven his congregation. He asked the members of his congregation to join him in those prayers. Just a few new families. Is that too much to ask? The new families he envisioned never came. But a home for adults with developmental disabilities did open nearby, and some of the residents began to come to worship. And then those folks brought some of their friends. And the congregation received these newcomers warmly, even if a bit awkwardly at first. It required something of an adjustment. For one, they had to adjust their expectations of what a new member of the church would be like. True hospitality does not ask a

guest to change, but it does demonstrate a willingness to be changed by the guest. And, by the way, when these newcomers joined the church, my friend said that it was the most joyous service they had shared in a very long time. He said, "By receiving these new folks, we became more of a church than I thought we were capable of." In other words, they had been changed.

No, we do not always hear a knock on the door and immediately respond, "Thanks be to God." That can be hard to do sometimes. Without implying that the issues surrounding immigration are simple—they are not—I do think it is interesting to think about immigration in this way. When, as it were, an immigrant knocks on our door, is our response more like Dorothy Parker's, "What fresh hell is this?" or is it closer to the porter's, "Thanks be to God?"

The image of Jesus standing at the door and knocking, which comes from our reading from Revelation, has long been a popular image with evangelical Christians. In that rendering Jesus is knocking at the door of an unregenerate heart, seeking entrance. It is another way of saying that Jesus longs to have an individual accept him as personal Lord and Savior. But there is another way to understand the image of Jesus standing at the door and knocking. It is related, but it is also different and very much along the lines of what we have been considering here.

Why is the porter in a Benedictine monastery so quick to respond when someone knocks on the door? Why does he go to such extraordinary lengths to welcome the stranger? It is not just out of some general sense that it is the right thing to do. No, the porter immediately gets up to respond when someone knocks on the door of the monastery because it might be Jesus. It might be Jesus knocking on the door. Not Jesus as we have ever encountered him before, but Jesus just the same. As an old Celtic saying has it, "Oft, oft, oft goes Christ in stranger's guise." Or, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to put it, "Jesus often comes to us in his distressing disguise as one of the poor." After all, didn't Jesus say, "As you did to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me?"

So when a porter—or someone of a porter's spirit—hears a knock on the door, he doesn't tarry or ask, "Who's that knocking at my door?" No, instead, he gets up and declares, "Thanks be to God," and asks, "Your blessing, please," because it could be Jesus. And often—oft, oft, oft—it is.