



CHURCH IN
Bethesda

"DOORKEEPERS" RYAN PHIPPS, SENIOR MINISTER, SUNDAY, AUGUST 27, 2017

Almost three years ago on the 18th of November, at 2:08PM (EST) my son was born. Alec John weighed in at 8lb. 8oz. 21 1/2 inches long.

I noticed something about our time in the hospital in the hours following Alec's arrival when a doctor came in to check on us, because this doctor didn't look like any of the other doctors.

To be honest, she didn't look very healthy. She was missing all of her hair. I don't mean that her head was shaved, either. I mean she was missing all of it. There was no fuzz or stubble. It had all just fallen out. She had all the telltale signs of someone who had recently gone through (or who was currently going through) chemotherapy.

The hair loss. The anemia. The tired looking eyes. The tangible presence of exhaustion. My heart broke for her.

Of course I didn't say anything. You just don't do that. And after all, she was there to treat us. She was the healthcare expert, not us. But as she was talking I sat there in my chair in the corner of the room and I started to think about this paradox.

Our doctor is a cancer patient! Shouldn't she be in the hospital bed with someone caring for her? Should she even be working right now? Is she capable of fully caring for us right now?

That may sound ignorant, but I'm just being honest with you— these are the thoughts that began racing through my mind.

Our Doctor was not healthy. She was sick.

The Doctor left, and the baby fell back asleep. I continued to sit there for quite a long time thinking about the strangeness of hospitals—their odd niche in human life— and God used this experience to teach me some things about this thing that we call church.

Here are some of the mental notes I took that day.

Think about what a hospital really is, practically speaking.

- When you move to a new area, what is one of the first things you assess? How far am I from a hospital, right? At least I do.
- Hospitals are close to population centers for a reason, because the people that make up the population are its clients. Hospitals serve as kinds of “hubs” for healing.
- Hospitals are required by law to treat everyone who walks in their doors. How it gets paid for is a complex mixture of funding, but in one way shape or form, anyone that needs help can

receive treatment at a hospital because of the collective contributions of a society, whether through insurance deductibles, taxes, or private donations.

- Hospitals also partner with the outside world. Family Physicians, and dermatologists, and pediatricists, and heart doctors, and ear doctors, and bone & joint specialists, etc. etc. There is an ongoing dialogue between the hospital and the world outside the hospital.
- The success of the treatment given in a hospital almost always depends on the follow up and home care of the patient. If the patient doesn't follow the instructions given to them at the hospital when they go home, they will likely become more sick than they were before and wind up back in the hospital for the same ailment.
- Hospitals are staffed by people who are as prone to the same sickness as their clients- doctors, nurses, orderlies, office staff, administrative staff, janitors, kitchen staff, etc. - who often find themselves receiving treatment from the very institution that they themselves are employed by.
- But above all what I started to realize as I sat in that chair by the window in that room that day is that hospitals exist for the sick, and the sick alone. It is their reason for being. Without sick people, hospitals would cease to exist, and yet, knowing this, the hospital's chief goal is to rid

the population center it serves of sickness, altogether. In other words, the hospital's goal is to put itself out of business. And if it did, that would be the very height of success for it.

The way I see it is that a church and a hospital are not much different.

Mark's gospel says something along these lines.

That evening a man named Levi invited his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners to be his dinner guests so that they could meet Jesus and his disciples. (There were many men of this type among the crowds that followed him.) But when some of the religious leaders saw him eating with these men of ill repute, they said to his disciples, "How can he stand it, to eat with such scum?"

When Jesus heard what they were saying, he told them, "Sick people need the doctor, not healthy ones! I haven't come to tell good people to repent, but the bad ones."

- Mark 2:15-17

What's that say about the church as an institution with Jesus as its head?

What's that say about us and how we view this institution called "church?"

What's that say about those of us in the room who never feel like we're never measuring up in our

behavior, who struggle with the same chronic soul-sickness season after season?

Who is church for?

The healthy or the sick?

Our text from Isaiah today, which we heard just a moment ago— a Messianic prophecy, uttered hundreds of years before Jesus would arrive says this about the Messiah who would come.

The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me

because God anointed me.

He sent me to preach good news to the poor,

heal the heartbroken,

Announce freedom to all captives,

pardon all prisoners.

God sent me to announce the year of his grace—

a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies—

and to comfort all who mourn,

To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,

give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,

Messages of joy instead of news of doom,

a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.
Rename them “Oaks of Righteousness”
planted by God to display his glory.
They’ll rebuild the old ruins,
raise a new city out of the wreckage.
They’ll start over on the ruined cities,
take the rubble left behind and make it new.
You’ll hire outsiders to herd your flocks
and foreigners to work your fields,
But you’ll have the title “Priests of God,”
honored as ministers of our God.
You’ll feast on the bounty of nations,
you’ll bask in their glory.
Because you got a double dose of trouble
and more than your share of contempt,
Your inheritance in the land will be doubled
and your joy go on forever.

- Isaiah 61:1-4

This is the kind of God who longs to be in our midst as we gather each week. We are all

welcome here, because we are all “sick” in some way... even me.

We're not bad because we're sick, and we're not sick because we're bad. It's just life. We get injured emotionally. We experience trauma. Things don't always work out as we planned. We break, we mend, we heal. This is what it is to be human.

This is what the church ought to look like. In fact, if you want a church that's filled with only beautiful, healthy people who have it all together, you don't want the church that God wants.

Our goal is to treat everyone who walks in our doors, even those of us who may not think we are sick. We also exist for those of us who cannot afford the treatment. No one gets turned away or pushed out.

The church also exists for those of us who don't see any results from the treatment yet. So we keep coming back. We keep applying the treatments and we follow up in our home care.

Church exists for the afflicted who are ever in the process of healing.

And as we enter this next season in the life of our community, I don't want you to forget why we are here. Our business is people. Doing all that we can to convince people that God is, and that God loves them.

This is our God. The great physician. A healer who understands us, because he became one of us. Jesus understands what it's like to live in your skin.

I want to close today by sharing one of my favorite pieces of literature that has ever been written. It was written by a man named Samuel Shoemaker who, many long years ago was Rector at Calvary Church on 21st and Park, just around the corner from where I pastored in New York. He finished his ministerial career in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where I'm from, which is how I came across his body of work.

Many years ago, I hijacked an old recording of my friend Brian McLaren reading the poem at a conference and myself and some friends layered some music around it.

The poem is titled, " I Stand By The Door."

Let's listen intently, and let these timeless words wash over us, and into us- because they speak to us very plainly about what our mission and vision are as a church full of people who are ever bringing healing, as we ourselves heal.

[CLICK HERE TO WATCH/LISTEN](#)

Let's stand.

The urges in our lives: The urge to be kind instead of cruel. The urge to love instead of hate. The urge to bring justice instead of injustice. The urge to show mercy instead of retaliation.

These urges are the God of the universe alive in you, breathing in you, trying to live Its life through you.

God dignifies us with these urges. God loves us so much that he leads each of us, mysteriously in our own way to this door, not so we'd go inside and call it "game over - mission accomplished" but so that we might lead others to that same door.

God does what he does in the world through human beings of flesh and blood.

May we strive to be doorkeepers in our lives of working, playing, growing, and commuting.

May we be a people who are always sensitive the promptings of God, using us as wounded healers.