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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Do Not Bother Me;  
The Door Has Already Been Locked

*A Sermon by*

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Luke 11: 1-13

The first little church I served as a seminary internship was Femme Osage United Church of Christ, the oldest Evangelical and Reformed Church west of the Mississippi River.

Founded in 1833, Femme Osage became the mother church for six other congregations as German immigrants to America made their way down the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers to that rich river bottom land. Many were farmers, and the fields were rich with corn, wheat, soybeans and hogs. The area around Femme Osage was also wine country, so winery tours, bakeries, cheese shops and antiques were increasingly popular. Through the times of bumper crops and crops flooded out, through thick times and thin, the little white church that looked like it belonged more in rural Vermont than Augusta, Missouri, served its people and its neighbors, even those tourists who passed through their piece of Americana. Life seemed simpler back then, with quilting circles and talk about how much it rained last night. Still, they had one eye on the past and one eye that darted toward the future, as they saw their sons and daughters drive off to the big city of St. Louis for a 'real job'.

Seminary intern that I was, I started in September. It was within my first few days that my telephone rang at like 5:30 am. Back then, there was only one 5:30 in my day, and it was not the one where the sun was coming up. I answered, surprised, alarmed, sure that someone had died or had had a tragic accident. "Pastor, this is Freddy. I was thinking this morning about our meeting next week, and I thought I would share some ideas with you."

"You what? You were thinking? At 5:30 in the morning? Who thinks at 5:30 in the morning? No one has died? No one has been life flighted to a hospital? Freddy, do you mind if we talk later in the day? When would be a good time for us both? When your hogs are fed and your chores are done and I am actually awake? Would around lunchtime work for you?"

Freddy and I went on to become best of friends and worked together well in the church. We struck a deal. He would not call me before 10 am, I would not call him after 7:00 pm, or certainly not at midnight, which was more of the time zone in which I functioned then. I knew, way back then, that I had gifts for ministry, all kinds of people skills, especially when you got to know me a little bit.

Freddy would not have liked the knock on his door at midnight, as the parable Jesus tells goes. Of course the word that Jesus uses, 'friend', 'philos', Philadelphia, brotherly/sisterly love kind of friend may be different. Jesus was not using the word for a stranger, a random person walking through the village late at night pounding on doors. This was a story about a friend. Remember the houses were likely attached like Mary and Martha's, one built right on to the next, interconnected, intergenerational, interdependent. This was a safe and secure village where people knew their neighbors. They shared common areas, like wells and baking ovens. The whole village knew who baked their bread when, whose bread was the freshest, who had just baked their bread that very day.

"Freddy, I know you are in there. I know it's late. You and the kids are all balled up together sleeping. I hate to bother you, but another guy has just come into town. He's tired and hungry and, well, I saw your family baking bread today. Can you help me out?"

There are times when we can meet the needs of our friends. “Can I borrow a screwdriver?” “Can you help me with this?” There are many times, and perhaps the most important requests, where we can do nothing to change the situation. “I lost my job. Can you get me a job where you work?” “I’ve got cancer, can you make it better?” “I’m lost, I mean, I just don’t know what to do with my life. What do I do? Will you help?”

It’s easy enough to give a loaf of bread when there is plenty of grain after a good harvest. Even the poor can afford it, and those who do have enough don’t mind giving away some to the hungriest among them. But what do we do with those big things, those moments when our friends knock on the door of our hearts, asking, searching, pleading for help?

Do we give them a snake or a scorpion? It shocks us, just as it shocked Jesus’ listeners, that one would turn away a friend. How good a friend are we really? In a time of need, would you, will you, get up and unlock the door for your friends? And should you find yourself on the outside knocking, can you name, two or three friends to whom you could turn in a time of a crisis of faith, a crisis of health, a crisis of meaning and purpose for your life? Would it matter if it was 5:30 in the morning or late into the night?

Will you be more than a fair-weather friend, a Facebook friend, one of hundreds, or a face to face friend, a middle of the night friend, a take-my-bread-it-is-fresh-from-the-oven-friend?

Today is a moment when we get to say thank you to a friend, to Dana, to our Commissioned Minister of Christian Education who has been on staff at Church of the Beatitudes for ten years, in our ministry of welcoming and our education program, and who is now leaving us to be a full time music teacher at Arizona School for the Arts. Dana has been a friend, and colleague to Ted and I, and she has been a friend to countless numbers of you, your children, your grandchildren, our teachers, and youth leaders. Not only in this church, but across the conference, UCC and even Presbyterians, Dana has been a friend: one who listens, acts, loves, shares, plays nice (most of the time), and speaks truth. With her permission, I went back to the paper she wrote for her Commissioned Ministry status, and I was reminded of her faith journey: raised as a Mennonite, attended Presbyterian and UCC congregations, always raised to live the questions, experiencing God in life and in death of loved ones. Dana’s words: “I remember thinking how wonderful it was that I belonged to a church that incorporated the belief systems of other churches and religions into its own so easily. I enjoyed the activity and appreciated the message, but I never understood the unconditional love and consistent care that a faith community can give until my mother was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. I truly didn’t understand how anyone could survive emotionally without a church family.”

Coming to this church ten years ago, Dana became an important friend to many. She was a welcomer, often the first person who greeted a guest. She was a leader; parents and kids trusted her to be their spiritual guide. She was generous with her time. On and off the clock, Dana was available to people. She met them where they were on their spiritual journeys and with her empathy, her genuine care for others, she answered the knock at the door, time and time again. It didn’t matter if

it was 5:30 am or midnight. Dana has been a disciple and a discipler of Christ. She has, in her own spiritual journey, walked the walk. Prayer and reading, living the questions, asking and searching for herself, has deepened her gifts as she walks with others on their journeys. I know a lot of you will want to say thank you to Dana. If not today, but in the days ahead. Sometimes it takes some of us a while to recognize the influence a person has had on our lives. I hope you will share your gratitude.

Dana will continue to be a part of our congregation, we hope, but we know better than to continue to ask her questions about a job that is no longer hers. Annabeth Stem is stepping forward to organize nursery through Sunday School, and she has wonderful gifts to offer this Church that she has come to love also. Elizabeth Koebel will be starting in August in our youth, 5<sup>th</sup> grade and up, so we continue to look one eye on our past, but the other on our future. Imagine new families coming through our doors, kids in tow, and wondering, are we welcome here? Are our children welcome here? Will this church open their arms to us also?

I have done a children's sermon where I take a shoelace and ask, "Tell me what this is?" The end of the shoelace. (actually it is called an 'aglet'). What is this called (other end)? If this is the end and this is the end, then where is the beginning?

Dana, may this be a new beginning for you: a new opportunity for you to follow your bliss, to share your incredible gift of music, to continue your gift of teaching, and to touch lives in a new way. Thank you from all of us and we bless you on your journey.

It is a new beginning for us also. It is a time for us to hear the words of Jesus about our call to be a friend, a brotherly, sister friend who hears the knock, throws open the door, and offers bread, fresh home baked bread. Amen.