**Greeters in God’s House**  
A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
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Text: Psalm 84  
Video telling of the Prodigal Son found at  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xONjlDWyJ8

A doorkeeper in the house of God...that’s the way the way the writer of this psalm talks about himself. Two different things caught my eye in that description. The first was “house of God”. I wondered whether we think about church as a place that is a house of God. The second word was “doorkeeper”. That caught my eye because it reminded me of all the scriptures we read last week that encouraged us to welcome the stranger. I want to talk today about what it means to be a doorkeeper, to be a welcomer in the house of God. But before we talk about the role of the doorkeeper, let’s talk about the idea of the church being the house of God.

As Mennonites, do we talk about our church building as the house of the God? The Israelites certainly thought that way. This Psalm was written by the sons of Korah, it’s not a psalm of David. So it was written long after the temple had been built by Solomon. Solomon built the temple, dedicated it to God, and there was a belief that God dwelt in the temple. It didn’t contain God completely, but the building was a way of making God accessible. That’s why the temple was so holy and so significant for Israel. When people go to the Temple, the house of God, they are joyful...they are in the presence of God. Do we feel God’s presence in our building?

Traditionally Mennonites have preferred to call their churches meeting houses. They refused to say that any one building was more important than another building. Mennonites focused on the people being the house of God, not the building.

A couple of years ago the church I was pastoring in had a small fire on a Saturday night, and so we couldn’t meet in our sanctuary. We didn’t cancel church...church was meeting, just not in our regular building. The house of God that morning turned out to be the fellowship room of our local funeral home (and we happened to have child dedication that Sunday!) Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20) God is present in a special way when we gather together.
But what about the building, is it God’s house? I have a hunch that God’s name is not on the title of this property as the owner. Maybe the courts wouldn’t consider God a legal entity (not until a tornado comes along, and there is an act of God!) But I have talked to some of you about the building of the church, and I get a sense from you that you were building God’s house. This just wasn’t any old building, it had a special purpose. We sometimes say, “this is my church” or “this is our church”, but on a very deep level I think we would all agree that it is God’s church. It is God’s house, it was built as a meeting place for believers in God.

When I say “house of God” you might think of this building, or you might think of the people this building holds. Either way, this morning we have our bases covered, we can say we are in God’s house. We are here in God’s name. God is present in a special way among us. We feel the joy that the Psalmist felt when we come to worship here. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!”

So if we do call this God’s house, let’s turn now to the idea of doorkeepers. The Psalm talked about being a doorkeeper in the house of God. Are we doorkeepers? What exactly is a doorkeeper?

When I think of doorkeeper I can think of two meanings. My girlfriend lived in New York City for a while, in a high-rise apartment building where she had a doorman. The doorman was the person who manned the door. He was the gatekeeper literally, because there was a locked metal gate in front of the elevator, and the doorman controlled that locked gate, it only opened if he pressed a button. The owner of the building hired the doorman, and gave him a list of instructions: these type of people you let in, these type of people you keep out. As a visitor, you had to go to the doorman and explain your business, and he could decide whether to unlock the gate for you or not. He was sort of like a bouncer in a bar. He was the judge, working on the instructions of the owner of the establishment. That’s one way of thinking about the doorkeeper.

Another way to think of a doorkeeper, one that is a bit closer to home, is to think of the people who stand at the doors at Wal-Mart. They are the greeters. Now Wal-Mart may be a store you don’t particularly like because of their policies, but they have this interesting staffing arrangement that makes them different than other stores. There is an employee, a greeter, standing at the door, waiting for you, welcoming you to the store, offering you a cart, and answering any questions you have. You walk in and ask, “Where do I find the snow shovels?” They will be happy to assist you. The Wal-Mart greeter is the face of the corporation, reflecting the philosophy that the customer is to be welcomed with open arms and encouraged to come on in and buy something.

So if we were to have the job of doorkeeper in the house of God, which the Psalmist talks about, what kind of doorkeepers are we supposed to be? Do you think God wants us to be the bouncers, controlling who goes in and out of the church? Or does God want us to be the greeters, reflecting the philosophy of the owner of this house making sure that everyone gets a warm welcome?
Remember the scriptures about welcoming the stranger, the alien, the sojourner? Today during our children’s story we saw the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus actually told a set of three stories, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. And the point of all three stories is to show God’s attitude towards people...God is always happy and rejoicing when people come home to God’s house. If people come here, God wants to have them welcomed warmly. As I was thinking about this, an old hymn kept coming to mind...let’s sing one verse of “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling” right now.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals He’s waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.
Come home, come home,
You who are weary, come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner, come home!

If Jesus is calling people softly and tenderly, certainly the role of the doorkeeper in the house of the Lord is to have that same sort of attitude. Because Jesus is the one we work for, and he calls the shots. The type of doorkeeper we should be is a lot closer to the Wal-Mart greeter, than to the New York doorman. But I wonder. Sometimes, some of our actions to newcomers can feel like we are the doorman or the gatekeeper. Things we do and say, can, maybe unintentionally, be seen as judging rather than welcoming. I want to share a few stories of my own experiences as a newcomer, as well as stories that some newcomers have shared with me over the years. Hopefully these stories can help us reflect on our own behavior. And I want you to notice that my stories are not about ushers. We may think about ushers as the greeters, but for the visitor, every person they meet is the face of the church.

I make it a point when I have a Sunday off, to worship in other churches. I like going to churches to worship, of course, but one of the main reasons I do this, is because I want to experience what it is like to be a stranger in a church. I want to feel what it is like to not know anyone, to not be sure what to do, to be the stranger and the alien.

And I am always surprised at how hard it is to go to a new house of God. And keep in mind that I am a minister and I love going to church, and I still find it hard to go into a new one; especially if it’s a small church. In a big church, there is not much social pressure. I went to a big church that met in a movie theatre, I just sort of sauntered in, and it wasn’t that big a deal because there were hundreds of people milling about, and I didn’t feel particularly conspicuous. Not everyone knew everyone, and I could just slip into the darkened theatre and wait for the service to begin.
But it’s a lot harder to go to a small church. A small church can feel like a social club...everyone knows everyone, and as a new person you can feel like you don’t belong. It’s socially awkward to be the odd person out. Usually when I go to a small church for the first time, I time it so that I arrive just before the service begins. I don’t like those awkward minutes in the foyer where you don’t know anyone and you have read all the bulletin boards, and you don’t really know what to do with yourself.

I went as a visitor to a small church a few years ago. I walked in and I was going across the foyer to the bulletin boards, and there was a person who was walking towards me. They saw me and they literally did a double take; they looked at me and then they looked away and then they looked back. They looked me up and down, and then they walked by me, without smiling or saying anything. They just ignored me completely.

I felt like I was on Sesame Street in that game with the song, “One of these things is not like the other; one of these things just doesn’t belong.”

Another time, I was in a church I had never been in before...at the beginning of the service we had a moment where people could turn and greet each other, and a number of people had been smiling and friendly and they shook my hand. So when the service was over, I was kind of expecting to have a conversation or two with these nice people. The last hymn was sung, everyone stood up to go. The people in front of me immediately started talking to each other in a very animated way. So I turned to the side. The people next to me were rushing down the pew in the other direction to go somewhere, so I turned around, and the people behind me were engaged in a conversation with people behind them, so their backs were to me. I kind of looked around and everyone was talking to everyone. What a friendly church, I thought...they all like to talk to each other. They just don’t happen to be talking to me. I slowly wandered out and got my coat; the pastor was at the door, and I paused there for a few minutes hoping to at least say hello to the pastor. But someone was engaging him in an intense discussion about what the next topics in the adult Sunday school class would be. Standing there and waiting eventually just felt too awkward, so I just slipped by and left.

Those are two of my stories, now here are some doorkeeping examples that have happened to other people. These all happened in Mennonite churches...people have shared with me that this is what they experienced.

A person comes to church, after an absence of several years, and someone who knows them comes up to them and says, “Where have you been?”

A person who usually attends one church in a community, started coming to another church. Again someone who knows them comes up to them and says, “What are you doing here?”
A teenager, a stranger to the congregation, comes to church and sits down in the pew. The first person who talks to him that day is an older gentleman who leans over to him and says, “Take off your hat, you are being disrespectful.”

A person walks into a new church, but he is fifteen minutes late. The first person they meet in the empty foyer looks at them, and then pointedly looks at their watch.

Now, I’m not sure any of the people I’ve just told you about set out to be doormen, who were trying to make someone feel unwanted, or bounce them out of the church. Maybe some of the things they were saying were sort of good-natured, “Where have you been!” sort of thing. But to the person who heard it, it felt accusatory, it felt unwelcoming, it felt like they were being challenged as to why they were there.

I think Jesus’ example of the Prodigal Son is an excellent story for us to think about when we think about being doorkeepers. I wonder whether there is someone in your family who doesn’t go to church. Maybe it’s your son or daughter, or your sister or your brother. Maybe they never have gone to church, or maybe they used to go, but have stopped. I don’t know why...maybe too busy, or maybe they had a bad experience in church, or maybe they’ve gone through some tough times with addictions or a tragedy in their life - whatever. You’ve been praying that God could draw them to a faith community, so they could grow closer to God. Imagine that this beloved family member phones you up on Saturday night and tells you, “I’ve decided I’m going to try going to church.” They have chosen a church in their neighbourhood. How do you want that beloved one to be received when they walk in those doors?

That’s our guide. Because each person that comes in our door is a loved one. Somebody’s loved one. And they are definitely God’s loved one. And you don’t know the backstory of who they are, or why they’ve come, or what they’ve been through, or how hard it has been or what a long road they’ve travelled to get to the place where they are ready to walk in the door of God’s house.

How do you think God feels about them being here? God is pretty excited. The prodigal son’s father doesn’t say, “Where have you been?” or “You’re late!” or “What are you wearing!” There are open arms, there’s a party. One of the things I loved about that video we watched was how much of the video just showed the kids singing and dancing for joy...because that’s the point of the story. God is overjoyed and happy when someone new comes to church.

And we work for God. If God’s philosophy is ‘welcome the stranger’, then that’s what we will do. So we are very careful that our words are kindly and welcoming, and non-judgmental.
I have to admit, personally, we may really wonder why someone hasn’t been around for five years. We are curious about that, or we may wonder what would bring someone here from another church. Is satisfying our own curiosity the reason we are in church? Does the Wal-Mart greeter ask us, “Why in the world are you buying snow shovels at this time of year?” Wal-Mart greeters probably wonder why we are buying things, but it is not their job to satisfy their own curiosity. Their job description is “Make people feel welcome!” That’s their number one priority.

We are not doormen, we are greeters. God could care less whether someone is late for church, or what they are wearing. We may mind, but that is not the point, because this is not our house!

We have to always remind ourselves that we are not in our house, we are in God’s house and anything we do reflects on God. We are the voice and hands and faces that God will use to welcome people. And if we fail to do that job well, then people can feel rejected. The stories I told you about how I felt left out in a new church were not a big deal for me, I didn’t leave church forever over it. But for someone who has used all their courage to come to church for the first time, it might be a deal breaker.

So I have a couple of challenges for you. In the next six months, one Sunday morning instead of coming to Lendrum, I want you to walk in the doors of a church you have never been in before. Choose a church where you don’t know a soul, a denomination that you are unfamiliar with. Go and experience worship...experience what it is like to be a stranger and an alien in a service. It will give you a new understanding of how hard it is to be the one who doesn’t feel they belong. I would love to hear what that experience is like for you. I think it will help you understand the heart of a stranger, and give you empathy for newcomers who enter our doors.

But in the meantime, as doorkeepers in the house of the Lord, I want us to make welcoming our number one priority. If a newcomer sits down near you, that means God has chosen you, you are up to bat this morning. Don't look around and think, “Where are the ushers, they will welcome these people.” You are the welcomer!

Many of you have lots of friends in the church, but I challenge you not to get caught up in conversations with your friends in the foyer so that you don’t notice what is going on around you. Always keep one eye out for newcomers. “I need to greet someone,” is the only explanation you need to say, if you have to hastily leave a conversation to do your job.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling...the Holy Spirit spends a lot of time working on people’s hearts to bring them to worship, to this house of God. What happens when they arrive? I hope, like the children in the video, like the psalmist, we will be singing and dancing with joy in the house of God. (We’re Mennonites, so we might do the dancing on the inside!) We worship a God who is standing at the church door welcoming us, each and every one, with open arms and with the heartfelt words, “I’m so glad you’re here.”