

# NOT HOLDING BACK

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November 24, 2019

Pentecost Last

[Jeremiah 26:1-6](#)

[Luke 23:33-43](#)

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(prayer)

Anyone who knows me and my taste in comedy movies will not be surprised that I quite enjoy those parody flicks that make fun of other movies: The [Naked Gun](#) and [Scary Movie](#) series, and the one that started it all for me: David and Jerry Zucker's and Jim Abrahams' [Airplane!](#) movies, which spun a satirical take on the Airport disaster movies of the 70s.

Maybe I'm just a fan of Leslie Nielsen:

*I just want to tell you both:  
Good luck, we're all counting on you.*

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[Airplane 2: The Sequel](#) took the parody to outer space as a commercial space shuttle is forced to make an emergency landing on the moon, where Lunar Base AlphaBeta is commanded by Buck Murdock (played by Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner).

In a funny [call back](#) to that iconic role, every time someone came to a door, they activated it by making a swishing sound with their mouth reminiscent of the sound the automatic doors on the starship Enterprise.

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As a kid, I always thought it was super cool how the doors on the Enterprise just opened up automatically when you walked up to it. I know that it is common place now, but (back then) it was the stuff of science fiction.

*Ok, Boomer.*

The closest we had were these raised pads in front of a few select doors that when you rolled your shopping cart onto it, the door would open, but it was slow. You certainly couldn't just keep walking at a normal pace like on TV.

Truth be told, on the set of Star Trek, the ship's automatic doors were actually operated manually by stage hands pulling ropes off camera. To quote another Buck Murdock line: *I guess irony can be pretty ironic sometimes.*

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And here we are, fifty years later, and we almost expect doors to just open for us.

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For the last couple of Sundays, we have read Old Testament passages from prophets who spoke into the time after the people had returned to Jerusalem (Haggai 2 and Isaiah 65); it was a time of hopeful reclamation and restoration, even if it wasn't happening fast enough for some.

Today we went back in time about a century to just before the exile and the protestations of the prophet Jeremiah. With Nebuchadnezzar's armies controlling the countryside and Jerusalem under siege, the prophet (speaking for God) implores the people to not lose faith: *Walk in my law; head the words of my servant prophets.*

Even if they had already given up on their God, Jeremiah holds open the door to renewal.

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King Jehoiakim had been trying to avoid Babylon control of Jerusalem, by paying financial tributes to Nebuchadnezzar: a practice that Jeremiah viewed as a government sanctioned rejection of Judah's God.

In fairness, at this point in Jeremiah's ministry, he still held out hope that the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem might be avoided.

However, a few chapters later he started to take a longer view... when Jeremiah [bought up some family land](#) and put the purchase documents into clay containers for long-term safe storage, so that (someday in the future) a descendant would prosper on that land once again.

As a common meme tells us: *We start to discover the meaning of human life when we plant trees whose shade we know full well we will never sit.*

Often said to be an ancient Greek proverb, but may only date back to the 1950s. Wise words, none the less.

Jeremiah held open hope for the future.

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As I have mentioned in recent sermons, faith was maintained and evolved during the years of exile. The door was left open even by the waters of Babylon where the people sat and wept remembering Zion.

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It is a oft-repeated hallmark of Jesus' ministry that a turning back to faithfulness and hope was always possible. A few weeks ago (here in this church), we heard about Zacchaeus' surprise visit by Jesus and the week before that a contrite worshipper finding unexpected justification.

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Jesus does it all of the time: when people believe that they are justified in giving up on others or even themselves, Jesus crosses the threshold of exclusion to welcome once again.

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This is the central characteristic of Jesus' leadership style. As the gospel of [John](#) records, Jesus told governor Pilate (who asked if Jesus was the King of the Jews, as some were claiming) *my kingdom is not of this world.*

In the longer story of Christianity, we see this claim as one to a heavenly authority --- a realm *beyond* this world.

But at the time Jesus spoke those words, clearly, as we look at how Jesus has been leading, they also meant: *my kingdom - right now - is not like Caesar's kingdom.*

Jesus' kingdom is...

- NOT Rome's *peace through might*, but *peace through compassion*.
- NOT Rome's *power of occupation*, but the *power of forgiveness*.
- NOT Rome's *far away, self-serving Emperor*, but an *accessible, helpful Spirit*.

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Of the numerous examples in the gospels, today's reading shows Jesus' open door policy as well as any of them.

All four of the gospel texts devote most of their attention on Jesus trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. They are very similar, but each evangelist has some unique narratives.

Luke shares the story of Jesus' conversation with his co-condemned while on their execution crosses.

As was a practice of deterrence, the guilty parties' crimes were displayed above their heads, so that passers-by would not want to do what they did. [All four gospels](#) record that Jesus' cross bore the words: *The King of the Jews*. The intent of the sign was to tell the crowds: *Don't question the authority of Emperor Tiberius, like this treasonous Nazarene did! All hail, Caesar!*

One of the others being execution at the same time as Jesus, obviously didn't take it that way: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

We know almost nothing about this executioner, but from the few things he is quoted saying in Luke 23, we can fairly assume that this was not the first time he had heard about Jesus of Nazareth. He seems to know that Jesus had done nothing wrong... certainly nothing that warranted capital punishment. The prisoner admitted: *I deserve this fate, but Jesus does not.*

I like to wonder how and when they might have crossed paths before.

- Had Jesus' reputation reached the crucified man's ears at sometime? From a friend or a family member or overhearing it on the streets.
- Was it during one of Jesus' teaching moments at the temple earlier in the week?
- Maybe they shared a jail cell, sometime on that Friday.

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I don't know if this person knew about Jesus' answer to Pilate: *my kingdom is not of this world*. But, (somehow) he had come to believe in a literal truth of this claim. *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

We don't know what heinous crime this one had committed, but it could not harden the heart of God still barely beating within Jesus' chest: *Today, you will be with me in paradise.*

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Elsewhere in John's gospel --- which by the way is one of the last New Testament books to be written, and uses the narratives of Jesus' life to encourage hope and faithfulness to a late first century, early Christian community --- *elsewhere in John's gospel* (chapter 14), Jesus uses the metaphor of a home to teach about nature of God's realm: *In my Father's house there are many rooms... I go and prepare a place for you... so that where I am, there you may be also.*

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This is a meaningful metaphor to me... the promise of an everlasting home in God, where I am not an out-of-place guest, but one who is expected and welcomed in the way that I need it to be. The door is opened for me.

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This past Wednesday, your church Council spent some time trying to find meaningful words to describe who we hope we are as a church. This was the culmination of several months of idea sharing and consultation on bringing new life to our decades old Mission Statement. You can find a link to the full text by going to the "[Our Beliefs](#)" sub-page of the ABOUT section of the church's website. A key phrase that speaks to the theme of today's message is the claim that:

*St. David's United Church is a community of faith where everyone can find an honest welcome.*

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It is one thing to say you are welcome, and still another thing to actually practice it.

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Believe me, over the last several months, as a Council, we struggled with that phrase (honest welcome). Do we dare to make such a claim?

Even around the Council table -- with people deeply committed to making this church as good as it

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can be -- hard-to-hear stories of unwelcome were shared. Some of us knew that pain; some of us got a little defensive; some of us had to look hard into the mirror (including me); AND... all of us lamented that (in spite of best intentions) we still fall short of the glory of God.

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As a minister, it is painful to realize that (from time to time) I have turned people off of the church... the 180° opposite of the reason why I do what I do.

It is one thing to have a difference of theological opinion (ministers expect that), but It deeply disturbing to figure out (usually too late) that (even if unintentional) it may have been personal based on something that was said or done, or unsaid or undone.

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Opening a door can be welcoming.

Allowing others to come in that open door can be welcoming.

But... *honest welcoming* requires a deeper commitment. *Honest welcoming* is active not passive.

Honest Welcome is reaching out beyond what we once imagined were the limits of who we could be... (look at image on screen) stretching out to complete the welcoming effort.

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The man on the cross simply asked for Jesus to be open to holding forgiving thoughts (*Remember me*), but Jesus reached out beyond just good intentions into the realm of truly impactful welcome. *I will not just think well of you when I go to my kingdom, you will experience that kingdom yourself. You belong there too.*

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Yes, it may be very, very hard to fully live out a mission to be a *community of faith where everyone can find an honest welcome*, but do we give up trying?

Because we are human and each one of us has a lot going on below the surface of our life, there are going to be times when some of us say and do things that give unwelcoming signals, even within the church. When that happens (and it will), do we give up on each other and abandon our mission?

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If we can't be perfect, do we just close the door?

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Jeremiah preached faithfulness unsure if his words would be heeded; then he bought a field.

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What Would Jesus Do?

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What Did Jesus Do?

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*Jesus, I have made bad choices,*

*I deserve to be condemned.*

*So what?*

*Today, you will be with me in paradise.*

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Let us pray:

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God, you are the strong source of mercy and forgiveness. Open our souls to your grace and love.  
Amen.

#210VU "You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd"

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