**“The Door of Room 204**”

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church on the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 18, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12: 20-33

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Invariably, our lives are lived in two ways. At times we act like a closed door, offering protection to those around us and to ourselves. We do things that create safer space. But we also can be like an open door, opening to something new, as we allow possibilities to flourish.

This morning, I want to tell you a story about a man who at one moment of time managed to do both of those things simultaneously. He was able be a door of protection just as he was able to be a door of opening and life.

Liviu Librescu came to the United States to teach engineering. He was 76 years old at the time of the incident. Librescu had been born into a Romanian Jewish family in 1930. During the war, when Romania was taken over, he and his family were sent first to a concentration camp, and later they were moved with other prisoners to a ghetto. Liviu Librescu survived the war. He was an intelligent and curious man, and he decided to study aerospace engineering. He married another Holocaust survivor, worked in Romania as long as he could, but when he would not pledge his allegiance to the Communist Party, he fled the country. Under a special visa issued by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the couple were able to immigrate to Israel. He worked at the University of Tel Aviv. After years of dedicated teaching and research work, he was granted the opportunity to go on sabbatical in 1985. He chose to study at Virginia Tech and things went so well there, that he stayed on and became part of the teaching staff.

On April 16, 2007, he entered a classroom to conduct a regular lecture. This happened to be the day that a massacre took place at Virginia Tech. A distraught student went on a shooting rampage, coldly walking through the halls and entering classrooms, killing fellow students and teachers. Thirty two people were killed and seventeen were injured. There were twenty-four students in Librescu’s class. Twenty three of them were saved that day, by the instinctive protection and care offered by their professor.

As they heard the shots coming closer, Liviu Librescu ran over and locked the only door into the room and pressed his body against the door. He then instructed the students to break the windows and jump from the second floor to the ground below. The bullets went through the door and entered Librescu’s body. Only one student was killed in that classroom, in addition to Professor Librescu.

Liviu Librescu made himself into a door for protection. His sacrifice ensured the safety of his students.

This is a truly remarkable story, obviously a choice most of us will never have to make in our lives. But even when the scale is smaller, there is always a time for each of us when the way we live counts. For me, that is the ultimate message of Easter. It matters what you stake your life on. It matters how you choose to live.

As we have walked the Lenten road, we have been considering many important ways to live – cultivating honesty, being kind, acting with generosity, witnessing to patience, and choosing to act selflessly. To this list, I would add two more ideas that come from our scripture readings today.

The first idea comes from the Jeremiah reading: you must allow your living to be bigger than the rules. God gave the people of Israel a list of rules to guide them. We know that list as the Ten Commandments. The rules went like this:

Honour God. No graven images. Do not abuse God’s name. Keep the Sabbath. Honour your parents – parents, honour your children. Do not commit murder or adultery. Do not steal or give false testimony. Don’t covet your neighbour’s stuff.

The Ten Commandments worked for a while, but over time the people learned that rules written on stone don’t make a lot of sense when the world is full of grey. Black and white rules are never quite enough. You can hear for example, “Thou shalt not steal”, but stealing is so much more than taking something that does not belong to you. Think about stealing a few extra minutes from your employer by coming back from lunch five minutes late every day. That adds us to a lot of time over the span of a career. Or think about stealing someone’s good name by the act of gossip; when a person’s reputation is taken from them by misplaced rumour and innuendo, their standing in the community is stolen. Think about watching a pirated movie, playing songs downloaded illegally, or offering quotes for a sermon when the real author is not recognized.

It’s all stealing but how much are we willing to own for ourselves? Jeremiah broadens the scope away from a narrow interpretation, and places the covenant in human hearts, so that living becomes an adventure in freedom. It is not about being tied up in the rules. It is about living with integrity and wholeness, living with purpose. The law is placed in our hearts, and each person will know and understand what God asks by listening and making room for the still small voice within. That’s how you make yourself bigger than the rules. You listen deeply to your heart. Liviu Librescu could have been the first one out the window. “Save yourself” is a pretty basic rule. But because he grew up in the most horrible of conditions, he knew that fear did not have the final word. Sacrificial love is able to break through the darkness.

And from the gospel, the lesson here is summed up in a phrase announcer Paul Harvey used to say. What made his broadcasts so memorable, was that he always told us the rest of the story. That has led me to realize that there is always more, a P.S., if you will. In the case of Liviu Librescu, it was the testimony of survivors, the very people who went on to build pretty incredible lives because they lived each day with the memory of their teacher’s sacrifice. Many of those who survived chose to become teachers themselves.

Jesus spoke about it with the metaphor of wheat. For it to live, a grain of wheat must first be buried in the ground, covered over with soil. It appears to die. But with time, and just the right amount of what it needs, the seed sprouts and grows. Out of apparent death comes life.

This was but one of the ways Jesus pointed his followers to the rest of his story. On this singular day, when he spoke about wheat he was really telling them that he would die, just as he had lived, in obedience to his Abba, in love for those who longed to know God. The rest of the story is not Good Friday; it isn’t death. The rest of the story is Easter. It is life.

Selfless love is real. Despite the horrors of war, and the brutal ways people continue to treat others, love is not only possible, it is the true end and the beginning. Unselfish people reside everywhere. They are willing to give of themselves for others. They become life givers, spirit transformers. Their actions become the best part of the story.

Selfless love is seared by trials, purified by personal growth, and shaped by persistent dedication that goes way beyond duty. Every day, people in this world open the doors and love, compassion, generosity, growth, truth, challenge and change pour out. That is the rest of the story worth celebrating.

You will see it every single day, if you choose to notice. It’s in homes and workplaces, in schools, at the grocery store, in hospitals and in restaurants. You always see it when you find yourself waiting for the light to change. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, was convinced that each act of love had a far-reaching effect. “If we all carry just a little of the burden, the load will be lightened for humanity as a whole. You may think you are all alone. But that is not the story. We are all members of one another. That is the real story. We are the children of God, and we are all in this together.”

It may happen on the day you speak up for someone whose voice has been taken away. You open the door to new understanding, through compassion. It may happen in the moment when you know it would be easier to sell out and compromise, but then you step up, and you open the door to a second chance and own your responsibility. It may come when you set aside one of your dreams so that someone else gets their chance. You open the door to gracious and abundant living. It may happen on the day you offer protection. You close the door that leads to fear. You open the door that leads to life.

May the generous love you have witnessed, from teachers, parents, role models, may the example you carry, inspire you and move you. Today we are being invited to live courageously and opening. We do this by listening deeply, by opening our living, and blessing others, and being present, giving without measure, not heeding the cost. May your life be an opening to the story that Jesus Christ is living through you. Open the door. Open the door.

Sources Used:

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John, A Devotional Commentary, Leo Zanchettin, Editor, The Word Among Us Press, 2000, pages 138-139.

Open The Door: A Journey to the True Self, Joyce Rupp, Sorin Books, 2008.