

## “Does God See Into Our Homes”

**Pastor Dave Carlson**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
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**New Testament Lesson:** John 20:19-29

**Old Testament Lesson:** Psalm 133

Colgate University professor M. Holmes Hartshorne once said, “Faith without doubt is dead; but doubt without faith is death.” “Doubt that is not grounded in an ultimate confidence in the Cross of Christ is doomed to skepticism, cynicism and despair, for it cannot see that in the loss of our certainties there is given to us the greater certainty of God’s redemptive presence. ...”

Today we ask the question, “Does God see into our homes?” In other words, when we are mired in the hustle and bustle of our busy and active homelife, do we experience the “redemptive presence” of God, that Hartshorne mentioned? Or does God tend to just show up at church for us, or when we’re with other people, apart from those we live with, those closest to us?

Isn’t that often the way it is – we treat other people better than we treat our own family members? We take better care of the workspace at our jobs than we do our own homes? Home is where we can be ourselves the most, let it all hang out. Our family has to put up with us, whereas our friends and acquaintances don’t. So they tend to get treated a little nicer, with a little more patience. With them, there’s the benefit of the doubt.

Listen to how Hartshorne concludes his observations about doubt and faith, “... Where doubt is rooted in faith, it becomes the source of honesty, humility and joy.”<sup>1</sup> What household couldn’t use a little more honesty, humility and joy? Giving those closest to us the benefit of the doubt helps us to create better relationships.

This is what Jesus teaches us in today’s New Testament lesson. The Gospel According to John says, “It was evening ... and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews (or really, fear of the religious leaders not the Jewish people).”

Jesus shows himself to the disciples and they believe – all except Thomas, who only hears about the risen Lord. Thomas says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” And Jesus gives Thomas the benefit of the doubt, graciously and patiently saying, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” And finally Thomas answers him, “My Lord and my God!”

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<sup>1</sup> M. Holmes Hartshorne, “Faith Without Doubt Is Dead,” *Religion and Life* (April 1956), 69-70.

Jesus says to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Blessed are we here today, who are part of this miraculous Jesus movement, keeping the faith alive down through the centuries.

How did this miracle of Christianity occur? It all started when Jesus was willing to do what it took to give the disciples, and particularly Thomas, the benefit of the doubt. Standing in their house, Jesus shows that he is willing to meet this unreasonable and kind-of-disrespectful demand of Thomas – putting his finger in the nail holes and his hand in Jesus’ side, all for the sake of Thomas’ faith, his spiritual well-being. It is just that type of tolerance and patience that we are called to show in responding to the doubt and skepticism of those closest to us, and particularly our family members who know us so well, who may have no or little faith that God might be doing new thing in us and in our households.

It’s like when I first decided to become a pastor in my late 30s. I think I’ve told this story before, but I had a successful career in non-profit management, and when I told my Dad I was leaving that to go to seminary, he said, “I don’t see why you would want to do something like that.” Needless to say, it wasn’t the response I was hoping for. I was a little hurt, and my first instinct was to push back. But somehow, by the grace of God, I was able to respond saying, “Well, I can understand your questions about it. We haven’t really talked about my call to ministry. Maybe sometime we can do that.” We never had to. From that moment on, my father has been the biggest champion of my call to ministry, and my Mom and Dad started going to church again

We can’t imagine the blessings we shut ourselves off from through our knee-jerk reactions to our family members, those people to whom we should be giving the benefit of the doubt? But how do we do that – how do we allow our family members to be just who they are, and be OK with that ourselves? By making each other right. We have that power, you know – the power to make another person right or wrong.

After the disciples come to accepted Jesus for who he is, Jesus gives them the power to accept each other or not, to make each other right or wrong. Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” We have the power to make each other right or wrong.

It’s like the mother who came in from shopping late one afternoon. Her teenage daughter said, “Mother, you know that vase that has been handed down from generation to generation?” “Yes, dear,” said her mother. “Well,” said the daughter, “this generation just dropped it.” Now that mother could either go off on her daughter, or she could realize it was an accident, and applaud her daughter for admitting she broke the vase. How she responds depends on how that family has learned to relate to one another over the years.

In Christ, we have the opportunity to learn new ways of relating to each other, ways that honor Christ’s spirit of honesty, humility and joy. One way to do this is to realize that God does see into our homes.

We may think it's just between us and the spouse; the kids; the parent, the brother or the sister. But really, the way we treat each other as family, it matters more than you know. It matters to your family members, and it matters to God. We cannot hide our true selves from God. After Jesus had risen, he found the disciples hiding behind a locked door, trying to protect themselves from a world that would do away with Jesus. It was their world that put Jesus on that cross, and it is our world that puts Jesus on the shelf. We do this when we compartmentalize our faith, pulling it out when it's convenient or necessary, but otherwise shelving it or ignoring it.

That's what we tend to do, when our faith gets in the way of our fun, or demands something hard of us, like going out of our way to turn around a bad situation and make things better at home. If we stop for a second when someone upsets us and – instead of lashing out in attack – we try to look at it from that person's perspective, God will give us a better way of responding.

It's at that moment when we are about to respond like we always do, that God gives us the opportunity to do something new, the opportunity to embrace the spirit of the Lord entering into our lives – into our closest relationships – and showing us a new way of responding. We don't have to respond the way we always do! Our God is the God of new life, and that means we have access to new ways of responding, no matter how old the hurt is, no matter how long "he's always been like that!" or how often "she's done it again!"

We all have patterns of behavior that we are locked into with those people who are closest to us – our family members – and even our fellow church members – this, your family of faith. Look at each other. Most of you know each other pretty well. You know how the other person is likely to respond to a given situation. But consider this: you don't.

You only know how that person has responded in the past. And if we stay committed to that past reality, then we stay locked in our old ways of being, our old ways of interacting with one another. The days roll by, new faces come and go, but we as a church stay the same – unless we let something new in. And that something – whether it's here in church or at home between you and your family – that new something is the spirit of the risen Lord!

The Lord dearly wants to be taken into your home, to be given a place at your dinner table or in your breakfast nook. When we let Jesus into our homes, he has the power to free us from our set ways of being, from always responding the same way and then wondering why nothing ever changes or gets better.

Think of the faith it took for those earliest disciples to go out and face the world, even after having seen the risen Lord, in the flesh. Now think of how much more it has taken down through the centuries for people to maintain that faith, the belief in the risen Lord that we profess.

It is a miracle that any of us is here in church today!

If God can establish a sustained faith over two thousand years, from one end of the globe to another, how much more can God establish it in your home, later today, or tomorrow morning, or whenever it is that your buttons get pushed one more time.

There is a new way of responding, and that is the Lord's way. When we respond to the same old situation with a renewed commitment to honesty, a deeper sense of humility, and a greater expectation of joy and newfound freedom, that's when God will work a miracle in your life.

Watch for it, when you leave here today – wait for that opportunity to respond in a new and hopeful way. And then recognize it for what and who it is – the miracle of the risen Lord, the miracle of new life, new possibilities – ready to enter into your home and your closest relationships. Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer**

God of new life, we thank you for this place of worship and this time of prayer. We want so much to help others to know you and experience your grace and peace, but sometimes we just do not know what to say.

Help us to be focused on the life of your Son so that by his example, we might faithfully reflect your love in service to others.

Breathe on us the breath of new life; break down the walls of our resistance, O God, so that we might do what you would have us do.

Enliven our ordinary moments into occasions for worship and joy as we serve you in our interactions with one another.

And for those who find joy hard to come by, those who are ill and for those who care for them, for those who grieve and those who struggle with any type of loss, Lord, surround them with your loving and healing presence.

And for us, Lord, help us to enter into a place of peace, confidence, and wisdom – a place that comes into view as we pray the words that you taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**