

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Safe Spaces

August 26, 2018

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\*We've spent the better part of the summer exploring ways to connect with God. I began the summer sermon series, *Spirituality for Busy People*, by talking about the heaviness I was feeling in my soul and suggested that maybe some of you might be feeling the same way. After all, adulting (and being a teenager and starting junior high and sometimes navigating life at any age) is hard and we aren't supposed to do it alone. Sometimes we get so busy doing "all the things" that we suddenly find ourselves feeling disconnected from the One who brings us life. I hope this series has encouraged all of us to give ourselves permission to pause and spend time developing a deeper connection to God, to our truest selves, and to one another.

Today, we conclude the series realizing, while we have spent some time drawing near to God, the world hasn't changed at all. All of the things that were causing me to feel isolated, anxious, and sad earlier in the summer, are still present. Immigrant children are still in cages. The disparity between the very rich and the very poor in this country continues to grow. Members of the LGBTQ community continue to hide who they really are from their families and employers, and when they do come out and find the one they want to spend the rest of their life with, they can't find a minister to officiate their wedding or a cake to celebrate it. People I love are still fighting cancer, struggling with addiction, grieving tremendous loss, and realizing their dreams may never come to be. In the face of all of that, how do we turn the corner into the busyness of fall, with the sense of hope and purpose we have tried to cultivate this summer?

I hope along the way we have discovered some spiritual practices that will draw us back to God, even in the face of life's challenges. So, let's talk about ways we can remind ourselves that God is present in our lives, even when life is hard. Because that list of things still wrong in the world? Those things, those people, need Christians who are committed to living out the ways of Jesus, which are rooted in God and God's love for all people.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have a tangible way of reminding themselves that God is faithful, and in turn, they can be faithful to God. \*This reminder comes in the form of a mezuzah. The word mezuzah, translated literally, means "doorpost" in Hebrew. In the Jewish tradition, a mezuzah is a small roll of parchment tucked inside a decorative case or tube, affixed to a door or doorframe. Written on the parchment are fifteen verses from the sixth and eleventh chapters of Deuteronomy. Included in today's text are 6 of those verses.

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9:

\*Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, <sup>2</sup> so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. <sup>3</sup> Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

And these are the verses from this chapter written on the mezuzah parchment:

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in

your heart. <sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup> and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The purpose of the entire book of Deuteronomy was first and foremost to define a pattern of conduct which conformed to the terms of the covenant God made with Israel. Such conduct required single-minded, whole hearted, exclusive allegiance to God. In other words, in order to be the people God created them to be, the people needed to put loving God above everything else. The same is true for us. In order for the people of Disciples Christian Church to be who God wants us to be, we have to put loving God first too.

\* “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” This is **the** one thing. This is so important the people were instructed to recite these words to their children and talk about them all the time, at home and away, day and night. How about us? Do our lives reflect God’s love for all people? Do our words proclaim our great love for God...day and night...all the time? It’s easy to forget that’s our goal, so let’s circle back to verse 9.

\*“...and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” A mezuzah on the door is a reminder that the people inside that dwelling belong to God, that God cares deeply about everyone who enters the home. For the Jewish people, there is a sense of security and connection with the Sacred in the placement of a mezuzah.

\*Each mezuzah has the Hebrew letter shin inscribed on the outside. Shin is the first letter of the word Shaddai, one of the names for God. Shin also begins the word *shema* which means “to hear” in Hebrew. The Jewish prayer found in today’s text that declares the oneness of God, “*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone,*” is called the

Shema. This prayer is repeated again and again in Jewish liturgy and is so sacred that it is meant to be the last thing a Jewish person says before he or she dies. So, in some respects, the mezuzah case isn't just a decoration or protection from the elements, it is a restatement of the essence of the Jewish faith.

Shin is the first letter of the word shalom, usually translated as peace, but, I've mentioned many times before, shalom is so much more than peace. It's wholeness and well-being for all of creation. The mezuzah may not fix everything wrong inside or outside the home, but it is a reminder that there is an ideal to be hoped and worked toward; a world where everyone has enough, where justice for all is a reality, and each person is able to be who he or she was created to be.

And last, shin is the first letter in the Hebrew phrase *Shomer daltot Yisrael*, "guardian of the doors of Israel." Throughout history, some Jews have considered the mezuzah kind of an amulet or good luck charm that keeps evil spirits away. It's probably not a surprise that rabbis aren't wild about this way of thinking. However, even they have allowed that a mezuzah, insofar as it is a small physical reminder of God's power and presence, does keep the people from harm's way. The Talmud teaches that reminders like the mezuzah keep the people from straying from the ways of God.

We've learned a lot about the mezuzah, but is there something like that in the Christian tradition? What can we do to remind ourselves what we believe about God and who we are in relationship to God and each other? What can we do to proclaim our homes "safe space?" Lauren Winner, author of *Mudhouse Sabbath*, writes about a time when she and a friend were walking and came upon an old door that someone had thrown away.

\*Taped to the front of the door was a little sign that read, "The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even forever more." ~Psalm 121

Winner pried the little sign off the door and took it home with her and posted it on her own door. She writes, “Every time I come home I see the sign, and I remember that I claim to actually believe in this God who will preserve my going out and coming in, and I remember that this home is supposed to be a Christian home. It is a home into which I invite strangers, and in which I organize my time through prayers, and in which I do work that might somehow infinitesimally advance the kingdom of God. And when I walk in and walk out of my apartment and see the sign, I also remember the proclamation that I am making to others: the sign tells you that I am a person who is trying to be a Christian, and in telling that to you, I am inviting you to hold me to it.” She concludes, “It is just the doorway, but is the beginning of making a Christian space out of an ordinary apartment.”

I wonder what we could put on our doors as physical reminders of spiritual realities. What could we fasten there that would mark our homes as a place where one might encounter God? Or that would remind us, not only that our homes are safe space, created by a God who loves us fiercely, but also reminds us that as Christians, we have a responsibility to create safe space in the world. What would that thing be? I think we ought to figure it out and buy it or make it or have our artistic friend make it for us.

Beyond the safe space of our homes, I’ve been on the look-out for ways people are creating safe space in the world. As I’ve looked, I’ve noticed that there is a great debate going on about the idea of “safe space” and how that intersects with protecting freedom of speech. So, I think we have to be careful about what we mean by “safe space” in the public square. Unlike, Dr. Everett Piper, President of Oklahoma Wesleyan University, who criticizes the idea of safe space, especially on campuses, I do not believe, as he puts it, “safe spaces exclude people under the banner of inclusion.”

(<https://www.okwu.edu/blog/2018/03/no-coddling-allowed/>) True safe

spaces allow all people to express themselves, to be themselves, without fear of ridicule, physical harm, or negative consequences, like loss of income or expulsion. True safe space encourages respectful conversations, new ideas, and connection, not one-sided, divisive rhetoric and lifting up one religious tradition or way of believing over all others.

So, what might a safe space look like?

\*I just finished reading, *Signs of Hope: Messages from Subway Therapy*, by Matthew “Levee” Chavez.

Chavez lives in New York, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, but which he acknowledges can seem pretty lonely. In the book, he describes how isolating the subway can be, people crammed in like sardines, but avoiding interaction with one another...no eye contact, gazes fixed on phone screens and headphones firmly in place. He wondered if there was a way he, as an artist, listener, and teacher, could facilitate connection among New York subway users. He chose a spot on the subway platform, set up a table and two chairs, and a blank book and he sat down in one of the two chairs. Next to the book was a sign which read, “Secret Keeper.” Pretty soon, someone came along and asked what he was doing. Chavez showed him the book and invited him to write down anything that was weighing on him. He said, “The emotional burden of your secret won’t be as heavy for me. I’ll help you carry it.”

Over the next few weeks, hundreds of New Yorkers stopped at the table, writing in the book and telling their stories to Chavez. In the book, he writes about the day before the 2016 election. Many people stopped at the table that day to talk about their fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Chavez describes the day after the election, “The following morning was a dreary one for a majority of New Yorkers: a morning of surprise, anger, disbelief, and for some, elation. A palpable tension coursed through the air...I stopped by a store on the way to the train to

buy extra supplies, remembering how my mother, a grade-school teacher, used sticky notes in her classrooms to get her students to open up.”

\*He set up his table and, one letter at a time, wrote EXPRESS YOURSELF, on pieces of white paper and stuck them to the wall behind his table. He took a sticky note and wrote, “I’m sad my friends are upset,” and affixed it to the wall behind him. He writes, “Almost immediately, someone stopped to write. Soon there was a flood of people scribbling around me, some lingering to read the notes left by others. Some would stop to speak; others wrote, read, even wept.”

\*At the end of the day he peeled every single note off the wall, saving them for the next day when he put them all back up and others were added to them. He writes about the people who helped him put them up and take them down each day, “Each morning that followed, a group of friends and passersby helped me put up thousands of notes in the tunnel, each night new people stopped on their way home to help me collect the originals and the thousands of new notes that had been written that day. I’m eternally grateful for the help of these volunteers of far-ranging political leanings.” Chavez had truly created a safe space. The rest of his book is page after page of pictures of the individual sticky notes. Here are some examples of what people wrote:

“I felt so hopeless, until I saw this.”

“I’m not all sure it’s going to be okay.”

“I miss my son.”

“I’m tired of being homeless, sad, and alone. God hear my cry.”

“I am gay and I am terrified.”

“Spread love, it’s the American Way.”

“Cultivate light. Spread it into the darkness.”

I hope this series has reminded you of your inner light and the great Love that imbedded that light within you. I hope you have been inspired to share that light with a world that needs it.

And finally, the Gospel of Luke tells us that, following his time alone in the desert, Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth where he read the prophet Isaiah's words to the people. Here are those words, altered to include all of us:

\*The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because she has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

\*She has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (translation by Teri Peterson and Amy Fetterman, *Who's Got Time? Spirituality for a Busy Generation*)

The words were altered to include all of us because we are all included.

\*The Spirit of God is upon us now and whenever we share God's light and love with the world. One open door, one sticky note, one safe space at a time, we can change the world. And probably, we will see that we change right along with it. Amen.