

“Barriers”
Luke 7:1-10
6th Sunday after Epiphany

February 13, 2022
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

A few years ago, Tara Westover published her bestselling memoir, “Educated,” a memoir about growing up in poverty, in the mountains of Idaho with Mormon parents who kept her out of school.

When she went to Brigham Young University in the early 2000’s, it was her first experience in a classroom.

Recently, Ms. Westover wrote an essay that described in detail what it meant to be poor while attending college:

“When I think of my first semester at college,” she writes, “the memory comes to me as a physical sensation. I feel tired.”

“There is the siren-screech of an alarm sounding at 3:40 in the morning. I do not change clothes. It was my habit to dress for the day the night before, because an alarm blaring at 3:40 really does sound much better than an alarm blaring at 3:30.”

She gets up at this time so that she can work as a janitor at the engineering building before heading to her own classes at 8am. But when that janitorial job was not enough, she took a second job working in the cafeteria....never mind that she could not afford to eat the food she was serving to her fellow students.

She goes on:

“My college ambitions nearly came to an abrupt end in my sophomore year. I needed a root canal and \$1,600 to pay for it. I decided to drop out...Then, a leader at my church pulled me aside and insisted that I apply for a Pell Grant...

“Days later a check arrived in the mail for \$4,000...”

It was more money than she had ever seen.

She got the root canal.

She purchased the textbooks that she had previously been unable to purchase during her first year at school.

She stopped dozing off in class.

And she graduated in 2008, going on to get her PhD from the University of Cambridge.¹

Now what was Ms. Westover writing about?

Poverty, yes, but not only poverty.

She was writing about barriers.

About obstacles.

About the kind of hurdles that some people face in life and other people don't...

All of which got me thinking about the Church.

God's Church.

How the Church is doing these days.

Because if there's anything that the recent past has shown us...engaging—or reengaging people in God's Church—
is running into BARRIERS.

As a recent Wall Street Journal article puts it:

¹Tara Westover, “I Am Not Proof of the American Dream,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2022, found at [Opinion | Tara Westover: What 'Educated' Was Really Trying to Say About Student Debt - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/opinion/tara-westover-what-educated-was-really-trying-to-say-about-student-debt.html)

“In-person church attendance is roughly 30% to 50% lower than it was before the pandemic... While religious leaders expect some rebound once the pandemic recedes, many don't expect attendance to return to previous levels.”²

Anecdotal evidence supports this.

In conversations with colleagues around the country, I know of no Presbyterian church—ours or anyone's—that has returned to pre-Covid, 2019 levels of worship attendance.

And please do not misunderstand.

I think that our congregation has done very well and that all of you have responded with extraordinary faith throughout these past two years. But we cannot assume that if we all just behave the same way we did in 2019, then 2022 or 2023 or 2024 will FINALLY look like what 2019 looked like...

**What kind of barriers do people face these days
when it comes to worshiping in church,
or visiting a church,
or engaging in the life of a church,
or just plain TRUSTING a church
with their souls?**

I ask the question not only because it's one that every church needs to ask right now.

I ask it because of our text.

Our text for today is about barriers.

² Janet Adamy, “Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren't Going Back,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2021.

Luke tells us that when Jesus enters Capernaum, a centurion hears about Jesus, and this Roman centurion sends some Jewish elders to speak with Jesus, to ask Jesus to heal the centurion's slave.

Immediately, we have a barrier, right?

You know what a centurion is...

A Gentile, not a Jew.

A person who commands 100 other soldiers in Rome's military might.

If you're suffering under the thumb of Roman rule, why would you trust someone who fights for Rome? Why would you help someone who wears the armor of the enemy?

Barriers ABOUND in this text.

Cultural barriers.

Religious barriers.

Political barriers.

It's why the centurion asks those Jewish elders to speak for him. He needs help breaking those barriers down.

Which brings us back to our day.

When it comes to engaging or re-engaging with God's Church, who needs help right now—breaking barriers down?

Or maybe the better question is this:

What barriers do WE, as God's faith community, need to overcome to reach those people?

What ways do we need to grow—not just numerically, but in how we think about what it means to be God’s Church in a post-pandemic age?

The Presbyterian pastor and professor, Tod Bolsinger, recently wrote:

*Many of us spent the pandemic asking ourselves some of the deepest questions of our lives, and a significant number of people are rethinking everything they assumed to be true
about their jobs, their relationships...
and what they wanted to spend their time doing.*

...church leaders should do no less.

*A crisis gives us an opportunity to ask the biggest question of all.
“Why do we (need to) exist as a church?”*

*We need to get as clear as possible on this:
Survival is not enough.*

And if your answer is “To ensure a Presbyterian witness survives in this town,” I encourage you to think again. As one senior leader said to me once: “Tod, nobody cares if your institution survives. They only care if your institution cares about them.”³

**Exactly.
What are the barriers?**

³ Tod Bolsinger, “What does the church need to unlearn from the pandemic?”, The Presbyterian Outlook, November 10, 2021, found at [What does the church need to unlearn from the pandemic? - The Presbyterian Outlook \(pres-outlook.org\)](https://www.pres-outlook.org/what-does-the-church-need-to-unlearn-from-the-pandemic/).

What is it that keeps people from knowing that God's Church—or even Westminster Presbyterian Church—cares about them?

Please do not misunderstand.

I do not ask these questions because I believe our church is doing something wrong. To the contrary, WPC is doing so much that is right!

We have a long tradition of thoughtful and engaging worship,
 an excellent music ministry for all ages,
 a splendid children's ministry that provides
 a firm foundation for our kids to grow in their faith,
 an incredible youth ministry that helps our teenagers
 question and explore and own their Christian faith.

We have exceptional adult education classes that stretch the mind and expand the heart.

Our Weekday School has a stellar reputation.
 Our commitment to mission in the community exceeds the norm for churches our size.

And our lay leadership is more than any pastor could hope for.
 Your dedication and loyalty and love for Westminster during the past two years that has given me HOPE in God's Church...

We're about to celebrate our 75th anniversary this spring.
 Our church membership grew during the pandemic.
 When I look around this room, I don't see fear about the future.
 I see faith.
 Profound faith. Vibrant faith. Hopeful faith.

AND we also know that the Church of 2022 is not going to look like the Church of 2019. My question is how can we take the gifts

**we've been given in our past, and use them faithfully in God's
FUTURE...**

Let me get at it like this.

Dr. Rodger Nishioka, as some of you know, is a pastor at Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City. Dr. Nishioka used to teach at Columbia Presbyterian Seminary.

A number of years ago, when he was still teaching, Dr. Nishioka was invited to Poland, Ohio to preach at an installation service for one of his former students.

After the service of installation, they had a potluck reception.

Dr. Nishioka was going through the line and he came to three plates on the table...all of which looked like they had pot-stickers on them.

But, he figured, they do NOT have pot-stickers in eastern Ohio.

At least, not homemade ones!

He asks, "What are those?"

And his former student says,

*"You are in Ohio--those are pierogies...[aka Polish dumplings]...
they are kind of like pot-stickers."*

He took one from the first plate and moved on down the line,
when BAM—on his left hip there was a woman who says

*"Pastor, you must have gotten distracted,
you missed MY pierogies...on plate #3."*

So he also took a one from plate #3.

But before he can move, BAM—another woman on his right hip:

"Pastor, I made the ones on the middle plate—

*--sauerkraut and bits of pork...
...they are better than the other two."*

So Rodger Nishioka ends up with three pierogies...

After the reception, as he was getting into a car to be driven to the Pittsburgh airport, one of the hosts at the church ran after him with a foil wrapped plate full of pierogies...

The pastor says: "You don't have to take those."

But Dr. Nishioka says, "This is church food – I'm taking it!"

He gets to the airport.

In line at security—through the machine with his bag and backpack...and into one of those gray bins—he puts this foil wrapped plate.

Out comes the bag.

Out comes the backpack.

NO pierogies.

Finally, a woman in her blue TSA uniform comes around. She's pointing to the foil wrapped plate.

"Sir, what is that?"

"Oh, that's a plate of church food."

"That's church food?" she asks.

"I'll buy it off you..."

Dr. Nishioka says, thanks, but no thanks.

But she persists: *"This is church food?"*

Doesn't Jesus say something about sharing?"

To which Dr. Nishioka replies:

**“Well, Jesus never said anything about sharing pierogies
at the Pittsburgh airport!”⁴**

And she laughed, and Dr. Nishioka took his plate and went on his way.

Now, wouldn't it be great if EVERYONE wanted some of our “church food”?

Wouldn't it be great if we could sit back, confident that spiritually hungry people will enter our doors, where we've got gifts to offer and food to share?

Sometimes that will happen.

But in a post-pandemic age, when new habits have been formed, that's not always going to happen.

As one of my colleagues recently wrote:

We are living in a time when ...spiritually hungry, institutionally suspicious people are looking for meaning but are often not finding it in faith communities. It is time for congregations to face this urgent challenge.

Faith communities cannot satisfy themselves with “inviting people to come join us” or with “member services.”

⁴ As told by Dr. Rodger Nishioka in his lecture at “The Festival of Preaching, Northwest,” Seattle, Washington, April, 2014.

Among the most challenging things for a congregation to do are to plan for, give attention and resources to...a constituency not yet present. Yet, that is exactly the call to [God's] church in this moment.⁵

To put it another way, God's Church is not ONLY being asked to invite people to meet us where we are. We're ALSO being called, in this post-pandemic age, to meet people where they are.

It's what the centurion did long ago.
It's one reason Jesus was so amazed at his faith.

Look again at verse 6:

“...but when he [Jesus] was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, ‘Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof...’”

Now why didn't the centurion just wait for Jesus to show up at his door?

There's a note in my Bible that says the following about this verse:

A Jew who came under a Gentile's roof would risk defilement.

In other words, the centurion does not want to put Jesus—this person he has never met, a faithful Jew—in a difficult spot. Would Jesus upset his own people if he enters the home of a Gentile, a Roman soldier, no less...to heal his slave? Who knows?

This centurion is not just thinking about HIS needs.
He's thinking about Jesus' needs.

⁵ The Rev. Mark Ramsey, “Sit & Get or Contend & Send—The Opportunity for the Church Now,” *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2021.

So he sends his friends to meet Jesus where Jesus is.
Huh...

What if THAT were the model for God's post-pandemic Church?

**A church that doesn't always ask people meet us where we are,
but a church that makes a point to meet our neighbors
where they are...**

To listen to what they're going through.

To learn what obstacles they face in their lives, barriers that prevent them from experiencing God's hope and peace and love—and then to act as Christ's hands and heart to break those barriers down.

For example...

How do we create a faith community for the young adult who grew up in the church, who's eager to do something to serve other people, but would rather listen to a podcast on a Sunday morning than a sermon?

Can we figure out a way to reach that person?

Can we find a way to treasure that spiritually hungry, BELOVED child of God?

When a family with a teenager who is transgender comes to worship with us, how will we make sure that family and that teenager feel welcomed?

How will we let them know that Westminster is glad to have their family here, just like any other family who enters our doors?

How do we create a church home for the CEO who is an expert not only at leading his company but also at hiding his alcoholism?

How do we give spiritual sustenance to the family of four that finds itself at the ballfield more frequently than in a church sanctuary? They still feel a strong connection to their church, but it's more challenging than ever for them to be present at church.

How do we meet that family where they are?
How do we feed them?
How do we nourish them?

We don't have to have answers to all those questions at this moment.

I do believe we must treat those questions,
and we must treat this moment—
as God's precious gift.

When we are equipped and sent by God to meet our neighbors where they are, it won't only be new neighbors, new friends, and perhaps new members of Westminster whose faces become familiar to us.

I believe that in their faces, we will see the face of Christ.

Amen.