

*Someone Is Knocking at the Door*

An Easter 4 Sermon  
John 10:1-10; Psalm 23  
Sunday, April 13, 2008  
Dr. Frank Trotter

[Pastor's Note: This is the second in a series of four sermons on First Church's Core Values. The theme of this sermon is "Inviting Community.]"

In olden times, an invitation might arrive by special delivery or through the mail. With the advent of technology, invitations could be communicated in much quicker ways via telegraph and then telephone. Two of the most popular electronic "invitations" right now are YouTube and MySpace (some might add Face Book). If you don't know what they are and have children or grandchildren in middle school, ask them; they'll know. And I won't be surprised if some of you with children or grandchildren in elementary school will tell me that they know how to use them!

For the uninitiated, YouTube<sup>1</sup> is a "video sharing website where users can upload, view and share video clips" of an incredible variety of subjects. Three former employees of PayPal formed the company in San Bruno only three years ago this past February. The company became so popular almost over night that it was acquired by Google in November of 2006 for \$1.65 billion in Google stock. You don't have to pay anything, register, or provide any personal information to use the site. It has even become an avenue where the candidates for the presidency can post video clips containing policy statements or responses to recent controversial events.

MySpace<sup>2</sup> is the phenomenally popular "social networking website offering an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, photos, music and videos for teenagers and adults internationally." It, too, is only a few years old and is owned by Fox Interactive Media. But already, it is estimated that MySpace is the world's fifth most popular website and the third most popular website in the United States.

How many of you teenagers sitting up in the balcony this morning have a page on MySpace? [Pastor's note: Almost all raised their hand.] If we knew

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<sup>1</sup> "YouTube" article at "Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>.

<sup>2</sup> "My Space" article at "Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My\\_Space](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Space).

what any one of these teenager's ID was, we could see what he or she has posted about him or herself. How many of you parents know what your children are saying about themselves?

Kobe Bryant, perhaps the most famous member of the Los Angeles Lakers, made YouTube news this week when he posted a video with these introductory words: "Do not try what I am about to attempt right now." Then he holds up a shoe, puts it on, and appears to be getting ready for some athletic event. A friend asks him nervously, "Are you sure about this?" Bryant replies, "Don't worry about. I got it. I will be there. I got this. Do you trust your boy? Sit back and relax and watch the show. Watch what I can do."

Then out of the left side of the picture comes an Aston Martin, a very expensive British sports car, racing right toward Kobe at 50 mph. At the last second, Kobe makes one of his famous vertical leaps and appears to jump completely over the Aston Martin. Laughing with delight, Bryant says to the camera, "I told you! That's how you jump over an Aston Martin. That is how you do it. Hyper Dunks. Do not try this at home."<sup>3</sup>

Well, there was a big controversy on the Internet this week while bloggers debated whether or not Bryant really did jump over a car driving toward him at 50 mph, even if Aston Martins are built notoriously low to the ground. But if you listen to the video, you heard Kobe say, "Hyper Dunks." What are they? As it turns out, they are the new brand of Nike athletic shoes that he is endorsing. His implied invitation, despite the disclaimer to not try this at home, is that if you put on a pair of Hyper Dunks, you, too, might be able to perform a famous Kobe Bryant vertical leap.

The problem with websites like YouTube and MySpace is that they are largely self-monitored. There's nobody at YouTube who will take responsibility for saying if Bryant really did jump over the car, or whether his commercial might encourage foolish, even deadly behavior by a viewer. Any registered member of YouTube can post any kind of video they want as long as it does not contain "pornography, nudity, defamation, harassment, commercial advertisements and material encouraging criminal conduct".

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<sup>3</sup> See "Kobe Bryant Jumps Over an Aston Martin," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IHQqELyCpw>.

Unfortunately, the company will only take action if it is drawn to their attention that offensive videos have been posted.

What sociologists are discovering about sites like these is that there are millions of people out there who are hungry for celebrity, notoriety, or just to be noticed. It's been discovered that articles are posted on how to construct a bomb or break into a confidential user account. We know that sexual predators are learning how to lure vulnerable teenagers into compromising and dangerous situations through the use of chat rooms and other dating services. Who is it that's knocking at the door with the use of this new technology?

This past week six teenage girls and two teenage boys were arrested in Lakeland, Florida "on charges they beat another teen in an 'animalistic attack' so they could make a videotape to post on YouTube."<sup>4</sup> Victoria Lindsay, the 16-year-old victim, was "attacked on March 30 by six teenage girls when she arrived at a friend's home."<sup>5</sup> It was not a random attack but was specifically planned to lure Victoria to a setting where she would be the victim and the other girls would be the aggressors. The two boys who were arrested had agreed to guard the doors so that no one could interrupt the video taping. After the attack had ended, Victoria was forced into a car and driven to another location where "she was told she would be given a worse beating if she contacted police."<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon, unfortunately, is not new. In February of last year, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled, "Teen Agers Misbehaving, for All Online to Watch."<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon of teens brutalizing other teens is called "cyber bullying" and is a worrisome – especially, because the aggressors want to be watched in the midst of their aggression. The viewer on YouTube is being invited, if you will, to become a participant in the aggression.

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<sup>4</sup> "8 Teens Charged in Videotaped Attack", The Associated Press, Tuesday, April 8, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/08/AR2008040800972.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Refer to article in the *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/13/nyregion/13video.html?scp=1&sq=teens+arrested+for+beating+of+teenage+girl&st=nyt>.

With the advent of any new technology that can affect society at such a wide level there needs to arise a conversation, indeed, a debate about the moral, ethical and philosophical implications of that technology on the society. Parents need to know what their children are watching. The owners of YouTube and MySpace need to be far more forthcoming in devising ways to monitor what is being posted on their websites, especially by minors.

And those of us within the religious community need to think long and hard about how many people there are out there who need a message of hope and promise in their lives, instead of messages of base commercialism, aggression, or exploitation. For there is someone who is knocking at the door, and it's up to us to help people to hear the knock.

That's what it means when we say that one of our four core values is to be "an inviting community" – for we are the bearers of the good word about this man Jesus of Nazareth, who preached to the poor, liberated those who were caught in any kind of sin or bondage, comforted those who believed there was no one to listen, healed those who were sick from all kinds of physical and psychological illnesses.

In the famous passage that you heard Jacob read for us this morning, we hear again how Jesus tells us that he is the Good Shepherd, the one who calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Because they know his voice, the sheep follow him trusting him with their very lives.

"I am the gate," he tells us. "I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find whatever they need. There are many in this life," Jesus warns us, "who come only to take advantage of you and to destroy. But I came that all may have life, and have it abundantly. For I am the good shepherd."

That's the invitation that we proclaim: to join us here as we practice what it means to build each other up in Christ rather than to tear each other down. We proclaim that we are an inviting community as we practice being proud of this church and encouraging others to become a part of it. We proclaim that we are an inviting community by examining all the walls that divide us in life and promising to God that this will be a place where divisions are eliminated and only unity prevails.

But we aren't going to be effective in inviting others if we're not truly committed. For example, what will we say if someone we've invited to church asks how often we come? "Well, I get there once in a while." No one wants to belong to a church where its members show up once in a while.

What will we say when someone we've invited asks us about our financial support of the church. "Why should that matter?" we might respond. "Well," this hypothetical seeker might reply, "I've read in all the current journals on church growth that the fastest growing churches are the ones where their members have learned to give 10% of their annual earnings to the church." What we didn't want to run into when we began inviting others to church were well-read seekers. Because the unfortunate statistics is that most United Methodists give an average of about 1½% a year to the church (about 8½ lower than God's expectation).

"Well, what about your commitment to Christ, whom you're telling me is your Good Shepherd? Do you trust him to the depths of your being?" Then we are inevitably led into acknowledging (at least secretly) that we place so many other priorities higher than we do Jesus Christ.

When I was a child, I remember learning to hear the old spiritual, "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door." It goes:

Knocks like Jesus, somebody's knocking at your door...  
Can't you hear him? Somebody's knocking at your door...  
Answer Jesus. Somebody's knocking at your door...  
Jesus calls you. Somebody's knocking at your door...  
Can't you trust him? Somebody's knocking at your door...  
O sinner, why don't you answer?  
Somebody's knocking at your door.

In one of his sermons, Henri Nouwen said, "There is a man who lives in my community who asks me, 'What are you doing here?' every time I see him, and a woman there who smiles and says 'Welcome!' whenever I see her. I could regard these people as mentally handicapped, or I could see them as angels who are bringing me important messages every day — to ask myself what I'm doing with my life on earth, and to remind me that I am welcome here."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Referenced at "Homiletics Online,"

[http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?keywords=welcoming](http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=welcoming).

When we become an inviting community in the name of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who is the gate, the very doorway to the Kingdom of God, I hope it's not only with a word of profound "welcome" but also the accompanying question, "What are you going to be doing here?"

Thanks be to God. Amen.