

Throwing open the doors

Benedictine monks are famous for taking Matthew 25:36 to heart.

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A few weeks before I was ordained, a gunman entered a Benedictine monastery just north of Kansas City. The man parked his car in the parking lot, walked into the monastery and opened fire. He shot and killed two monks and wounded two others; then he marched into the chapel and shot himself in the head.

Benedictine monks are known for their hospitality. They're famous for it. They take Matthew 25:36 to heart, welcoming everyone as if they were Christ himself. The Rule of St. Benedict says the following:

At the door of the monastery, place a sensible brother who knows how to welcome. Give him a room near the entrance so that when visitors come they will always find someone there to answer the door. And as soon as anyone knocks, let that porter say, "Thanks be to God: a blessing! A blessing!"

It was the porter who was shot first that day in Kansas City. He was gunned down as he was throwing the doors of the monastery wide open, proclaiming the stranger who would hurt him to be a blessing.

I am certain that God calls us not to death but rather to life. Yet there is deep and difficult wisdom in the story of the Kansas City porter, a mystery that is too elusive to name directly but that rings true. He seems at least analogous to the sort of figure Jesus had in mind when he said, "The one who saves his life shall lose it, but the one who loses his life for my sake shall gain it."

At my ordination, my mentor--Holly McKissick--lifted up the porter's heartbreaking death. On the one hand, she said, we should all pray that such a death never happens again. But we should also pray for the courage to emulate the porter's fearless hospitality, his cry of blessing even in the face of one who meant to do him harm. "This is the Christian life," she preached.

Not to be reckless or put or keep ourselves in harm's way, but to welcome one and all, even in the face of danger. This is how we are called and commanded to live. God wants us to throw open the doors of our hearts, the doors to our homes, the doors to our churches, greeting everyone as if they were Christ himself.

In one more year, I'll celebrate ten years of ordained ministry. This makes me wonder: am I living the Christian life? Do I throw the doors of my heart as wide as I should? Do I protect myself when appropriate but also say to one and all--saint and sinner, monk and gunman, perpetrator and victim--"Thanks be to God: a blessing! A blessing!"