

When the boys were little, we went on vacation to Charleston, South Carolina. Joan's mother, Ruby Apple, had never seen the ocean, so we took her with us. One afternoon, we went to the old part of Charleston and I began noticing these beautiful wrought iron fences and gates. Whenever I see a gate, I want to open it to see what is being closed off. Gates have never kept me out. So I noticed these beautiful gates, and when I got home I began researching them and discovered many of them had been made by the same man, an African-American blacksmith named Philip Simmons, who began making Charleston gates in 1938, and kept on making them until his death in 2009.

There was one gate that was especially beautiful. I thought, "If the gate is that beautiful, I wonder what's behind it." So I opened the gate and went in. It was someone's back yard, but they were at work. If they had been home, I know they wouldn't have minded my sneaking in. And it was so pretty, like something in a magazine. When we got home, I told Joan I wanted to buy a gate for our yard.

She said, "Don't we need a fence to go with it?"

I said I didn't think so.

I've been looking for a special gate ever since. I'll know it when I see it.

Our past two Sundays together, we've been thinking about the premise in Christopher Alexander's book, *The Timeless Way of Building*.

*"Every place is given its character by certain patterns of events that keep on happening there."*

That is, the things we do in a room determine the shape of that space. Not only the shape of that space, but its character and atmosphere, too. Certain patterns of events, specific behaviors, done over and over again, determine the spirit of a place.

Last week, we thought about the specific behaviors in our homes that enhance the character and atmosphere of our homes. The first pattern was meal-sharing, the second was openhearted hospitality, and the third was the pattern of cleanliness and order.

Today, I want to talk about two patterns of behavior that influence the shape and character of a spiritual community. The first is what I will call a pattern of elevation. Now what do I mean by that?

We need places and communities in our world where the human spirit is elevated. Places and communities where people can go and experience wonder and awe and beauty, where people can be treated with great dignity and compassion. Places and communities in which exist a pattern of elevation, as opposed to patterns of denigration and condemnation.

So that when people approach those places and enter them, they are able to sense deep acceptance and transforming love. At its best, this is what the church should be. And sometimes it is, but other times we in the church forget to establish a pattern of elevation and instead establish patterns of judgment, recrimination, and legalism. Judgment, recrimination, and legalism *never* elevate the human spirit. They only diminish, denigrate, and condemn, so after a while, the community is stagnant, then poisoned, then dead. It is like the oasis in the desert which once was flowing and life-giving and elevating, but then became brackish and salty. You crawled on your hands and knees to get there, desperate for life, but found skulls and bones. In this community, let us develop the pattern of elevation.

Sometimes, we'll hear people say, "That person is a hypocrite. She's sweet and kind on Sunday morning, but she's a holy terror at work." But you know what, at least she got it right two hours of the week. That's a wonderful start. At least she has one place in her life that brings out the best in her. So let us, in this community, practice the pattern of elevation, even if we are not able to sustain that spirit in every facet of our lives. Let's not give up on the other areas of our lives, but at the very least let's make the pattern of elevation a priority in this community. Let's be at our best when we are here.

The second is a pattern of gateways. I spoke just a moment ago about gates and how they are often the entryway into something beautiful or significant or life-changing. So place that image of a gate in your mind. Not a forbidding gate, topped with razor wire, designed to keep some people out and other people in. That's not the kind of gate I'm talking about. I'm talking about a garden gate that lets us know we're about to enter something momentous and different. There's no lock on this gate. Maybe a little latch to keep the dog from wandering off, but it can be easily opened, so we can walk through it. It's a beautiful gate, and when people see it, they naturally gravitate toward it and want to walk through it.

So the second pattern which must be present in a church or spiritual community is a pattern of gateway. Not gate-keeping, which is always designed to keep people out. But gateways, like a throughway or walkway or aisleway or freeway or doorway or entryway or passageway. Do you understand what I mean? There is movement through one thing into something else. Now let's think for a moment about what a church or spiritual community would look like that took seriously the pattern of gateways, took seriously the idea of helping people through one thing into another thing. Wouldn't such a community celebrate and participate in those significant life events that take us from one place in our lives to another. Remember the Sunday before Amanda was married and we surrounded her and her family and blessed them. That was a gateway. Amanda was moving from single life to married life.

So we were acting as a gateway that morning. Just a few months before that, we invited our high school graduates to come forward and we acknowledged their transition from high school life to college life, military life, and vocational life. We were acting as a gateway. Not long before that, we invited David and Laura Ballinger to come forward with Ruby and we walked with them through the gateway of married life to family life. We did the same for Eric and Amy Sageser and their daughter Sophia. The grandparents came, because they knew it was a gateway moment, and they wanted to be present. When Doris Elmore died last year, we held her memorial service at our meetinghouse, and we walked with her family through the gateway of life into death. We did that here, not at the funeral home, because this space is a place that takes seriously the pattern of gateways. We celebrate birth here, which allows to us mourn death here. We celebrate marriage here, which allows us to comfort those in divorce here. We celebrate graduations and success here, which helps us also be sensitive to disappointment and failure here.

Now, can we be born and graduate and marry the person we love and celebrate birth and mourn death without a gateway community? Sure, people do those things all the time without a gateway community, and I feel so sorry for them. I don't know how they do it. I don't know how we celebrate new life and comfort one another in death without a community to help us through those gateways, those portals of life, where we move from place in life to another.

These are two patterns to which every spiritual community must be thoroughly committed. The first is the pattern of elevation, doing all we can to elevate the human spirit, not diminish it. Even if we're not able to do that in every facet of our lives, let's do it here. The second is the pattern of gateways, accompanying one another as we move from place in our lives to another.

That is the community of Jesus at its best. Elevating the human spirit, not diminishing it. Laughing with the joyful, mourning with the sad, celebrating one's another's successes, and consoling one another in our disappointments.