

Good morning. Before we talk about the passage Kasey just read, I want to talk to you about doors. If you go on pinterest or instagram, or whatever it is you all are using these days, you can find hundreds of pretty, illustrated quotes about them. You know the sort of thing:

When one door closes, another opens. When God closes a door, He opens a window.
Opportunity knocks at the door only once. Love is an open door ...that's from Frozen; I'm sorry, before I came to seminary I ran a Sunday school program.

More seriously, Emma Lazarus welcomed immigrants to our country with the words on the Statue of Liberty, "I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Doors are one of our most beloved metaphors for new beginnings, for opportunities. And, extending the metaphor, there have always been limits on who among us have had access to those opportunities, and there's a whole other sermon there, I'm sure. But today I want to talk to you about literal, physical doors.

When I arrive at the School of Theology in the morning to go to class, I am confronted by doors that are not open to me. Six of them, to be precise. They are beautiful, these doors; black and impressive and edged with gilt. The reason I know them so well, the reason I pass each one of these doors nearly every day I am here, is that there is currently only one accessible entrance to the Boston University School of Theology. To get to it, you cannot enter from Marsh Plaza; there's a steep set of stairs there. You cannot go up the front steps, nor through the part of the building that belongs to our neighbors at Metropolitan College. No, if you are physically disabled at Boston University, you have to walk around nearly the entire circumference of the building to a plain green door to come in, and when you finally do, you wind up at the back, in the basement. And that's a hell of a metaphor, isn't it?

When I came here for the first time, I knew accessibility would be a challenge. A friend and alum who uses a wheelchair told me that BU was an amazing, welcoming community, but he warned me that he had once had to be carried up the steps in his wheelchair, and his story is not unique; I have heard many similar ones. But he told the story more as an invitation than a warning. For how amazing, that his classmates carried him up the stairs. And yet, however he meant it, how devastating, that carrying him up the stairs was the only option.

You may have noticed the ways in which I am referencing our passage, but let's make it explicit. In the passage, and I thank Professor Ventura for calling me to a greater awareness of it, a paralyzed man and his four friends learn that Jesus is preaching in a house in their town. Like everyone else, we can infer, the man and his friends are excited. Like everyone else, they want to hear Jesus speak. But when they come to the house, they realize that the board upon which they are carrying their friend will not fit through the door. But they do not give up. Rather, the man's friends remove the roof from the house and lower him down so that they can all hear Jesus's message together.

Now, we can say that perhaps Jesus should have been speaking somewhere else in the first place, and maybe that's so. But he wasn't, and this man's community cared enough to change

the environment around him so that they could have this transformative experience together. The healing at the end of the story is almost beside the point. Notably, Mark writes that Jesus sees the faith of the four friends in this action, not that of the man himself. It is not his faith that is in doubt here; he did not do anything unusual in being paralyzed, or in wanting to hear Jesus speak. But in recognizing that the problem lay not with their friend, but with a world that had been designed to exclude him, his friends take an action that Jesus finds worthy of recognition.

And even now, the world is not always that way. This remains a radical act. I have seen this in small ways in my own story. The thing I was most excited about when I came here was being a member of the Seminary Singers. I sang in choirs growing up, and I couldn't wait to be a part of that again. But I spent my first chapel service here openly weeping because it took me so long to get from my classroom in STH to the chapel that I missed the entire warm-up. It may seem trivial, but the cumulative experience of exclusion is exhausting. I could not walk to class with my classmates; I could not choose where to sit in lectures, my rollator was perpetually in the way. I felt cut off, and I still feel that way, at times. And yet. On that first day, a classmate I did not yet know held me as I wept, and walked back with me. Another classmate showed me how to form a club. Several people came up to me and told me they were disabled, too, or that they weren't, but they wanted to learn. In a hundred tiny ways, people have reached out to me across that divide, and there is bravery there. To take a stand for inclusion in a society that is often indifferent to it at best when you personally have nothing at stake does take bravery.

So how radical, that this man's friends refused to go in without him; that they believed in including him so fiercely they took the roof off the house when they could not find another way. Of course, let me be clear, I'm not suggesting we begin taking roofs off of places of worship. This roof in particular is an exceedingly beautiful one, and I don't think that's going to help anyone. But our policies must tend toward full inclusion, and beloveds, we are not yet there.

People with disabilities make up one-fifth of the United States population. But in so many cases, we are not considered, in policy or in practice. We are not in the room, either metaphorically or physically. For much of the history of this country, we were not welcome in schools, businesses, places of worship, or often private homes. Deinstitutionalization did not take place for many of us with physical disabilities until the 1960's and 70's. People with mental health disabilities did not win the right to choose to live independently outside of institutions in many cases until 1999. In 1927, celebrated Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. who, I must acknowledge, came out of my own tradition of Unitarianism, opined in *Buck vs. Bell*, a court case allowing the state government of Virginia to sterilize so-called 'mental defectives' without their consent, "Three generations of imbeciles is enough." In 1962, Ed Roberts, then a young man with polio, was told upon applying to UC Berkeley, "We've tried cripples before and it didn't work." Until 1990, it was entirely legal for non-federally funded agencies, business, and other spaces to decide they would not allow people with disabilities to live, work, shop, or receive medical treatment there. In most states, this is still the case for houses of worship.

It has been thirty years since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It has been in effect for nearly all of my life. And yet one in four people with a disability live in poverty. For

hispanic Americans, that number jumps to nearly one in three, for black Americans, nearly 40%. Even if we make it through higher education and obtain advanced degrees, many of us cannot work for free of losing the Medicaid benefits keeping us alive. Many of us are in the double-bind of being dependent on prescription drugs that are becoming increasingly unaffordable while at the same time having to fight against attempts to lower drug pricing that rely on a metric that literally says our lives are quantitatively worth less than those of able-bodied people, and keeping us alive should be priced accordingly. This past fall, a California utility company, attempting to control wildfires turned off power without adequately warning customers using ventilators and other medical equipment. A number of people nearly died, despite something similar having happened the previous year. And people with mental illness face immense stigma and a daunting shortage of providers, especially providers who take insurance. And all of this is significantly worse for disabled people of color, and disabled people who are trans.

I could, I am afraid, go on and on. Things are and have been incredibly difficult for our community, and there is much to mourn. And beloveds, I am tired. I am tired the way someone with a chronic illness who is nevertheless expected to do things like able-bodied people is tired. And I am tired the way anyone who has to continually wait for other people to deliberate on the extent of their personhood is always tired. Sometimes it feels like the door will always be too small.

But this is a service of mourning and *hope*. And there is cause for hope, both within our religious communities and within society at large. Our history gets lost, but we have heroes, too. It doesn't get mentioned often, but Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House and also a Unitarian who worked in my native Chicago, had a spinal cord injury and was chronically ill. Harriet Tubman is thought to have had epilepsy. And this is true for a number of historical figures who we simply don't choose to remember as disabled. But on top of that, we have a proud history of working to make things better for our community, more fair. Ed Roberts, who I mentioned earlier, did indeed attend and graduate from UC Berkeley, and went on to help found the first Independent Living Center in the country, and to play a key role in the protest responsible for passing section 504. His colleague Judy Heumann, who was once told she couldn't attend high school because her wheelchair was a fire hazard, also played a key role in those protests, during which people from across the disability community staged the longest sit-in held in a federal building in US history and won the right to be treated equally by any organization receiving federal funding. Across the country at various times, wheelchair users sat in front of busses until they won the right to ride. And in California this past fall, the Disability Justice Culture Club raised \$3,000 toward buying a generator to put in a community center for the next shutoff, when it comes.

And these stories are strongly in line with the values of the church, and the values of most religious communities, and the values of our university. We are not taking the roofs off buildings, but we are widening the doors, and adding audio equipment. There is a great deal in the Bible, and in this passage, that affirms the social model of disability, or, briefly stated, the idea that the experience of disability is often not so much about the impairments disabled people have, but

rather the systemic, physical, and social barriers constructed by society that exclude us. In short, one's community can make or break the experience of being disabled in this world.

When our communities come together, like that of the paralyzed man, we can do amazing things. The section 504 sit-in I mentioned earlier succeeded because they had community support, because black and gay activist groups stood in solidarity with the protesters, bringing in food and medical supplies. We can build those sorts of spaces now. We can choose to live into a world where we are all in community together, where no one is left outside the door.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to visit a new church with a friend of mine. I cried because the pastor's sermon on racial justice was incredibly moving and I cried because I nearly always cry in church. But mostly, I cried because the associate pastor at that church uses a powerchair, and I realized that I had never, in the thirty years I have been alive, in the thirty years that the ADA has been law, seen a minister using a mobility device in person. It brought home to me how much representation matters. We all of us have a need to see ourselves reflected in our church community.

But so many of our churches tell people every week that they are welcome regardless of ability, but do not use microphones or have captioning or interpreters or have spaces for wheelchairs, that hold religious education classes and social events in rooms that are only accessible by stairs, that do not provide sensory-friendly or fragrance-free spaces. We often say in the UU and UCC traditions, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." And I dream of a day when this is true. I dream of a church where I and my siblings are more than an afterthought or a burden.

We cannot undo the damage of the past in an instant. None of us caused it, and fixing it will be complicated and sometimes costly. It will take time and care. But I say to you in this place that carries the legacies of Martin Luther King Jr and Howard Thurman, that exclusion is wrong; that everyone who wants to be in relationship together is and must be fully welcome in our churches and synagogues and mosques and everywhere else. I am fully convinced that if we come together in our communities, we can find ways to make this so.

Emma Lazarus, she of the golden door, also said, "Until we are all free, we are none of us free." Until we have the capacity to welcome everyone, the church is not yet truly a home to any of us. None of us are free until all of us are free. Let us learn from one another, and build a world where we can all learn together. Amen, and may it be so.