"Opening the Doors"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
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"All beginnings are hard."
–*Chaim Potok,* In the Beginning

Beginnings are hard.
When I write a sermon, the beginning is always the hardest part. How do you jump in? How do you get started? Today...let's start with two snippets about beginnings.

At the age of five, my family moved shortly after I had begun kindergarten. Having just begun in one school, I found myself again standing at the door of a new classroom. I can still remember how vast that expanse of carpet seemed that loomed between where I stood in the doorway and where my new classmates sat on the floor in a circle.
Beginnings are hard.

My son will be 17 in a few short weeks. Over the summer, he has begun learning to drive. I find this utterly terrifying. Compounding the situation is where we now live in Lincoln. Our side street is sandwiched between two busy roads—Route 2 and Route 2A—and to get anywhere, a driver must learn how to quickly accelerate into traffic.

With a tight grip on the wheel and his head turning side to side, my son asks, "Do I go, Mom, do I go?" I had forgotten long ago how hard it is to begin to drive. Quite frankly, I have been inwardly apologizing for all the times I begrudged some "idiot driver" ...who I now realize may have been a terrified new driver—and, perhaps, a terrified parent sitting alongside.
Beginnings are hard.

For many of us, right now is a time of beginning. Recently our children and youth have begun a new school year—as have the parents and teachers among us. Some of you have recently begun a new marriage or begun life on your own after years of marriage. Some of you have begun to live in an "empty nest." And some of you have or will soon begin to live in a new home. Of course, together we are beginning a new chapter in the life of this congregation.

Last week we celebrated the beginning of this new year with the ritual of gathering together and sharing our stories as we poured water into a common bowl. It is right to celebrate such new beginnings. I hope that it felt great for you to gather together—whether

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you had been away for the summer, for years, or if it was your first visit. Celebrations are a necessary expression of joy. It's important to notice and to name the good stuff in life. We need such times to renew and strengthen our spirits. We *need* celebrations as food for our souls—and the start of a new church year and a new minister should indeed be a time of celebration and joy.

But, in this moment of a new year and a new minister, I think it's important to *also* say: *beginnings are hard*.

Why *are* beginnings so hard? To answer this question, I want to explore the concept of the liminal, which I think captures a bit of why beginnings are hard.

The word liminal itself comes from a Latin word meaning "threshold." The liminal is the moment of standing in the threshold when one place has been left behind, and yet, the next place has not yet been entered.

The liminal is the space between. It's the moment I stood in the kindergarten classroom doorway between what was known and what would be known. It's the moment of hesitation at the intersection between staying safely on the side road and pulling out into traffic.

As a space between, the liminal is understood to be a place of great uncertainty. It's a time and place where boundaries blur. The old system hovers just behind you with its familiarity and its known expectations *and* the new system lies right before you with its not yet known ways of being and interacting.

I also think of the liminal in terms of learning to drive in a new city. (*Obviously driving is on my mind a lot these days!)* Most of us who have lived anywhere for even a relatively short period of time develop familiar routes for getting around a place. We know our favorite route to the grocery store, to work, to friends, and to church. We learn when and where to expect traffic—like trying to avoid east-bound Rte 20 between 8 and 9am or 126 by the library at 5:30pm on a weekday.

We know our way around, and then we move to a new city. We no longer carry within us an internal map of where we are or where the back-ups will be during rush hour. Often it doesn't take too long to start figuring out a route to your favorite grocery store or the closest place to grab hot coffee. But for a while, there is an inevitable period of disorientation. It's not that you've forgotten to drive or can't read a map (or listen to a navigation system). But you're not yet familiar enough with the layout of a new place to anticipate what's coming next and when.

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You're in a liminal space, the in-between, the threshold.

Beginnings are hard, I think, because they are liminal spaces. Beginnings mark the start, the inchoate, the yet-to-be. At a beginning, we're standing in the threshold, looking ahead, but not yet *really* certain of what it will be like, of how to get around in this new landscape.

As a liminal space, beginnings are also ends because to stand at a threshold is to not only be moving toward the new, but also away from the old.

Who remembers the 90's pop song, "Closing Time" by SemiSonic? I think a line in that song explains well the link between old and new. They sing:

"Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."

Beginnings are hard.
Its moving towards some unknown future while moving away from a known and familiar past. In the liminal space of beginnings, joy and celebration mingle with echoes of sadness and grief. The nature of liminal space is this kind of mixing of the old and the new, the anticipation and the loss.

As a congregation, the interim period that Rev. John Nichols led you through was a liminal time. After 38 years, you celebrated the ministry of Ken Sawyer and you said thank you . . . and you had to say goodbye. In the interim, you also began to envision what a new minister might look like...and who <u>you</u> might be and become with a new minister.

Now we stand here together at the threshold. It's time to open the door and to walk through.

In a very literal way, I've been opening doors around here. If you've been in the church during the week, you may have noticed the doors from the Commons propped open as well as the door to the stairs to the sanctuary. This is my way of seeking to communicate an "open door policy"...my hope that you all feel welcome to come to my office or otherwise find a way to connect with me. As your minister, I want to know who you are, to hear your stories, to know why you're a part of this community. I want to hear your hopes *and* your concerns as we move together into this next chapter.

You may have noticed that I've also opened another set of doors in the church . . . I've asked that the doors on either side of the pulpit be kept open. Now, I imagine that at some point in history, these doors fulfilled a very good purpose—such as keeping the minister from

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falling 20 feet to the ground when this was a one story building and the pews were on vestry floor below us.

But, for me, it feels important to open these doors as both a symbolic and practical move. Practically, I hear the doors tended to squeak a lot when they opened and as you've seen I like to wander in and out of the pulpit a fair amount. This desire for movement is connected to what I feel is an important symbolism: that ministry is not something that I stand up here and deliver to you, but that ministry is the ongoing movement—the dance—that happens through the relationship between you and me, between each of you.

It's also important for me to sometimes be on the floor among you, because my vision for what it means to be a minister is that while I have a particular role in this congregation as your minister, I am not fundamentally different from all of you—

Like you, I wrestle with it means to live a meaningful life. I both rejoice in and struggle with parenting and with being in relationship with friends, family, and a spouse. I've spent years trying to make sense of what I believe a*nd* what I *feel* about the role of religion in my life and in the wider world. I carry with me losses of people I've loved deeply whose absence still brings me to tears. I am a person whose heart and spirit bear scars that testify both to my *fallibility* of making bad choices and to my *vunerability* of being hurt and disappointed by the fallible and very human people with whom I share this world.

I'm not a minister because I have all the answers. I'm a minister because I'm passionate about asking the questions. I'm a minister because I want to walk together with you as we all wrestle with how to live in a world where injustice and violence still, **still** ravage lives in ways big and small. I'm a minister because I believe that it *matters* that we kindle our spiritual resources so that we can hold on fiercely to our faith that there ***is*** goodness in this world, and in our human hearts. I'm a minister because I want to call us all to testify to the power of love to ignite the goodness that lies within us and to inspire our actions to help make the world a bit more loving and just.

When I stand at the threshold of this new beginning as the minister of the First Parish in Wayland, I look back and I see a community with decades of caring deeply for one another. I see a congregation who has loved and been loved by their ministers—ministers who are still loved and loving! And I see a congregation who knew how to celebrate and honor the ministry of Ken while also accepting that it was time for him to retire.

And when I stand at the threshold of this new beginning, I look ahead and I see an uncertain but exciting path forward.

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Chaim Potok says beginnings are hard, but that the hardest beginnings are those that you make by yourself. Although this is a new chapter in the life of First Parish, it is *not* a beginning that any one of us makes alone. In the short six weeks that I've been here, there has not been a single day that I have spent entirely alone in this building. While some of the people in the congregation have been here to connect with me, many—if not most—have been here to either connect with others **or** to give some of their time and talents in service of this community.

This flow of people is something that I celebrate because I believe that being a vibrant, healthy congregation means *sharing* the work. It means that we all bring *what we are able* to help the life and work of this community flourish. I do mean that we simply bring *what we are able.* I don't believe that there is one way to give to or belong to this congregation. I don't believe that there should be a single standard for the number of hours or dollars or years that someone must give to the church in order to be a "good" member. Rather, I simply challenge us all to bring ourselves and what we are able—to show up and to be open both to what we may be able to give as well as to what we may receive. For me, I feel humbled that you have chosen to give to me the role and resources to spend my days as your minister. To you I give of my time and talents as well as a good bit of my heart.

So the doors—both metaphoric and literal—are open. The future may be uncertain as we cross the threshold into this new chapter, but I believe that by working together that the beginning will not be as hard.

As we enter into this new year, I hope that as a congregation we will also explore new ways to open the doors of this church to others in the wider community. I think that there are a lot of people here in Wayland and nearby that would find joy and support by becoming a part of this congregation. Don't you?

Knowing that beginnings are hard, I wonder how we might help make it just a bit easier for people to begin here at First Parish? Already I've asked the staff and those who work in communications to pay attention to how we talk about what we do on our calendar, website, and other means of communication. Do we assume that who we're talking to already knows what we mean when we say "LRE" (*lifespan religious education)* or that people know the choir is always open to new people? One step towards opening our doors of our church is making our communications clear both to those who are already a part of this congregation as well as to those who are exploring becoming a part. *What are others?*

After the service, our membership coordinator, Kate Holland, will be in the Sunroom—downstairs just behind where I'm standing—to facilitate a conversation about how we make it a bit easier for people to begin here at First Parish. I know that there are also those

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who may begin *again* at First Parish after some time away . . . how might we help these people re-engage?

We are all beginning a new chapter, but we are not beginning alone. Let us gather today and in the coming weeks to talk with one another. Let us together walk through the threshold as we begin to shape together the ongoing life and work of this community.

So may it be.

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