

THE DOORS WE LOCKED

Unity on Maui • Rev. Blaine Tinsley • September 20, 2026

IMAGINE A DOOR

Picture a door. Not a grand one — just an ordinary door that has been there so long it blends into the wall. It doesn't announce itself. Now wonder, maybe for the first time: *who was that door built to keep out?* For four weeks we have been exploring the question Jesus was asked: *Who is my neighbor?* We walked the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. We heard the voice of the Christ come back to us from the faces of the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner. Today we make the hardest stop — not on the road, but right here, inside the walls of the church itself, because the institution that carried the gospel also locked some very specific doors. And the people we were supposed to call neighbor were standing on the other side of them.

AMERICAN PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS

The story of American Christianity and locked doors runs through nearly every community this country has ever excluded. The Methodists split in 1844 over whether a bishop could own enslaved people. The Baptists split in 1845 over whether slaveholders could serve as missionaries. These were the largest Protestant denominations in America, tearing themselves apart over whether the gospel applied to everyone or only to some. After the Civil War, the doors didn't open. They just got different locks.

THE MOST SEGREGATED HOUR — AND THE MISSIONARIES IN HAWAII

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his Letter from Birmingham Jail not to the Klan — he wrote it to the white moderate church, the church that loved order more than justice. He called Sunday morning *"the most segregated hour in America."* It still is, by most measures. The pattern repeated with almost every community this country has ever excluded — Chinese immigrants denied membership by the very churches that sent missionaries to China, Indigenous children placed in government-funded boarding schools with the stated goal of "kill the Indian, save the man," forced assimilation not formally ending until 1978. In Hawai'i, missionaries arrived in 1820 with genuine zeal and assumptions about which ways of praying were sacred. They banned hula. After the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom — carried out by the missionaries' own descendants with U.S. Marines providing the muscle — the Hawaiian language was banned from schools. By the mid-twentieth century, fewer than two thousand people could still speak it. *"This is what happens when a gospel of love gets bent in the service of power."*

"THEY DID NOT SIMPLY GRIEVE — THEY BUILT"

The Black church in America is one of the most extraordinary institutions in human history. Born in the hush harbors — secret gatherings in the woods where enslaved people worshipped out of earshot of those who owned them — these communities took a gospel that had been weaponized against them and found in it the seeds of liberation. They found Moses. They found a God who takes the side of the oppressed. They found a Jesus who was himself a poor man from a colonized people, executed by empire, who rose anyway. The civil rights movement was a church movement — the courage came from the pews; the theology of the beloved community came directly from Black church tradition. They kept the gospel alive while the dominant church distorted it. In Hawai'i, families kept the hula chants alive in secret. Hawaiian language immersion schools were founded in 1984, while the 1896 ban was still technically in force — an act of defiance and love. The ban was finally repealed in 1986, after ninety years. Every one of these communities is saying the same thing: *"Spirit is not stopped by a locked door. Spirit finds a window. Spirit finds a crack. Spirit builds a new room if it has to."*

THE UNITY STORY

Unity was founded in Kansas City, Missouri in 1889 — a slave state. Charles Fillmore preached "We are all one in Spirit," and yet African American congregants chose the back of the sanctuary, likely to avoid the scrutiny they'd learned to expect from white institutions. Not a written rule — just the unspoken atmosphere that told certain people where they belonged. A door doesn't have to be locked from the outside to keep people out; sometimes the arrangement itself is the lock. Black ministerial students were not allowed to live on campus. When pressed, Lowell Fillmore explained to a Black Kansas City newspaper in 1934: "We are feeling our way along. This is Missouri, and the Missouri people are not educated to the point, as yet, where they will accept Negroes on a basis of equality." Unity Village's pool, built in 1922, barred Black people for decades—until 1963, when Rev. Ralph Rhea watched Black children standing at the edge while white children swam and simply said, "Everyone swims!"

JOHNNIE COLEMON

Johnnie Coleman came to Unity in 1953; told she had six months to live. She was alive and wanted to go deeper. Denied campus housing, she commuted fifteen miles each way for two years from the YWCA in Kansas City. One day her car broke down in the rain. Soaking wet, she burst into tears: "I can't take it anymore. I'm finished." Her classmates signed a petition. Unity offered a cottage at the far edge of the farm. She said: "Fine. Take me to it." She stayed. She was ordained. She built one of the most influential New Thought ministries in American history, and she wrote: *"I made a commitment to teaching all people the soul-saving Jesus Christ principles that enabled me to change the course of my life, to endure indignities, and to begin again."*

GOOD PEOPLE WHO STOPPED LOOKING — AND BECOMING THE OPEN DOOR

These are not stories about evil people. They are stories about what happens when good people with genuinely beautiful intentions — stop examining the gap between what they believe and what they practice. Unity's own published history says it plainly: "No one seemed to notice the disconnect between the Unity teachings of universal oneness and the policies that actively discriminated against Black people." *What doors might we be maintaining right now that we haven't noticed?* Unity teaches that consciousness shapes reality. Renunciation — one of Fillmore's twelve powers — means letting go of the fiction that we have already answered the neighbor question. Three invitations for this week: **Notice** who is not in the room. **Cross** one threshold that feels unfamiliar — sit with someone whose experience is different from yours and just be present. **Examine** one assumption — ask: is this the whole truth? Or have I locked a door around this person without examining it?

THE DOOR THAT WAS ALWAYS OPEN

Queen Lili'uokalani, imprisoned in her own palace in 1895, wrote a prayer about forgiveness. Johnnie Coleman, shivering in a cold cottage at the edge of a farm that wouldn't let her sleep in its decent rooms, made up her mind to build something that would never turn anyone away. Not one tradition, not one people — a pattern through all human history: when the institution fails, the Spirit finds another way. Spirit never locked a door. Every locked door was a human decision. And every door locked by human hands can be opened by human hands. The beloved community is not a destination. It is a direction we keep choosing. **Go be the door that opens.**

THIS WEEK'S AFFIRMATION

*I am an instrument of the beloved community.
Where there has been exclusion, I welcome.
Where there has been silence, I bring witness.
Where there has been a locked door,
I bring the willingness to open it.*

A BLESSING

*May you leave this place a little less certain that you already know who your neighbor is.
May the doors you have not noticed begin to announce themselves —
the ones whose locks you did not put there but have not yet removed.
May you have the courage to ask the question that has no comfortable answer:
Who is standing on the other side?
And may you discover — as Lili'uokalani discovered in her palace prison,
as Johnnie Coleman discovered in a cold cottage at the edge of a farm —
that Spirit has never been stopped by a locked door.
It finds a window. It finds a crack. It builds a new room if it must.
You are that window. You are that crack.
You are the room the Spirit is building — right now, in this community, on this island.
Go in peace. Go in love. Go be the door that opens. Amen.*

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