“How do I get in?”
Hotel Sermon
March 6, 2016

Good Morning! I am Sarah Scoville

 As you drive into Bedford from Rt. 95 you pass suburban homes, the sign welcoming you to Bedford (one of the 100 Best Communities) cemeteries, a gas station, and soon you pass a bigger building than the rest. It has a small sign and no obvious front door.

 This morning I am going to talk about this building – otherwise known as – the Bedford Plaza Hotel, how it has impacted me, the community of Bedford, and what it has taught me about living in a community.

 My family and I have lived in Bedford for 6 years. One reason for moving here was Bedford’s sense of community. We liked the family organizations and a defined town center.

 After we moved here I quickly became involved with the Bedford Family Connection. This would be the first of many community meetings that I looked forward to attending to sit around tables and discuss different struggles that community members faced.

My journey with the hotel started the fall of 2012. Through the Bedford Family Connection I ran an art class at the hotel once a month. My son Andy, who was in kindergarten, would come “help”. One of Andy’s classmates was a regular at the art class, her name was Mia. She was very charismatic and very welcoming. She was eager to show Andy the hotel room she shared with her mom and brother. Andy thought it was cool to live in a hotel. A hotel to him meant vacation and a swimming pool, but this is not what it meant for Mia. \*

How did these families get to the Bedford Plaza Hotel? They had to prove to the state that they had stayed somewhere that posed a health or safety risk to their family. As a result the state placed them in an emergency homeless shelter.

 The kids living at the hotel got free lunches while in school, but no assistance over the summer. St. Paul’s, among many other volunteer groups, added to the 2013 lunch program. It was the first time that Chris asked me to help. This work connected me more to the community of St. Paul’s. Susanne Johnson and I worked together coordinating many of you to make PB&J, and turkey sandwiches, and dropping them off at the hotel. As the summer went on the hotel started to fill up. It went from about 20 families very quickly to over 80 families. The volunteers were quickly overwhelmed.

By August the murmuring started around town…. word had gotten out that there was a population of people living at the Bedford Plaza Hotel. Who were these people? Why were they living at the hotel? Who were these people taking the towns resources? Who were these people compromising our top schools? Who were these people lowering our property values? In September there was a town open forum that got angry and messy and surprising. Members of the community wanted answers to why these people were here and what was the town going to do about it.

There were also plenty of people around town who were not as loud, but equally concerned, more concerned for the well being of the families living at the hotel. Quickly the town followed up with another meeting in early October. The week before I stormed into Chris’s office and said “What are we going to do?” He encouraged me to write down what I wanted to say.

At the second meeting the town did a great job giving the facts, reporting on the school and housing prices, reassuring everyone that Bedford’s reputation was not compromised by the residence of the hotel. Then the floor was open for questions and comments. It started with logistical questions about town finances and transportation costs. Then the anger, the mistrust, and the fear started coming out again with stories of their kids being bullied on the bus by “those kids”. I slowly made my way to the line for the microphone. I spoke up for Mia and the kids at the hotel. I spoke up for Andy and how much Mia’s energy impacted his class in a positive way. I reminded everyone they were kids. I said that I had been in the hotel, \* I had found the door, \*
I had met them.

 State Representative Ken Gordon worked with the state to reduce the number of families that could reside in the hotel to 25. Everyone agreed it seemed a more fair number to impose on the small town of Bedford and its resources.

I found that the struggle between many of the residents of Bedford and the families who were placed at the hotel by the state is remarkably like the story that was just read about the prodigal son. Some of the Bedford families who were angry and worried were like the son who stayed. They have worked hard to earn money to support their families, buy a house, and pay their taxes. They felt they deserved the town resources that they received and there weren’t enough resources to share. The Hotel residents were like the brother who had left and come back home broke. In the story the father responds with love. Much of the community in Bedford responded with love as well - they thought that the families at the hotel needed help; we had the resources to share. I feel like after the dust settled in the fall of 2013 many more people came out of the wood work with their love wanting to help. I started getting questions from my friends - how do I get in? \* Where is that front door? \* How can I become involved?

By the holidays the Sunday Dinners were in full swing. Each Sunday a volunteer group provided a hot nutritious meal for the families to start the week.

Food brings a community together. The pancake dinner a couple weeks ago is a great example of how food has brought the St. Paul’s community together. Every Sunday we kneel around the alter and take the eucharist together. There are over 100 people across town that have regularly contributed to the dinners at the hotel. Providing a meal for families to sit down to has helped create community at the hotel, as well as share information about what the rest of Bedford community has to offer.

One thing that I noticed as I continued to become more involved is that my volunteering edge has expanded. I spoke at a town forum for the first time, I continually served dinner at a homeless shelter, I coordinated and empowered others to help. The face to face contact with the people living at the hotel has empowered me to do more. I could see the impact I was making which encouraged me to make more of an impact. It was in small ways like Mia’s enthusiasm when I saw her at school. \*
Or simply a thank you for dinner.

Another example of expanding my volunteer edge is that I have been sitting on the Bedford Hotel Task Force. The task force has met once a month and consists of all different constituencies that have connections to the hotel. It is facilitated by the head of Bedford Youth and Family Services. Representatives from the police, state, schools, board of health, volunteers, and the owner of the hotel attend the meetings. We have talked about very serious issues with some very smart people and it is done with humor. I look forward to these meetings every month because I am inspired by the people around the table. Many of their volunteer edges are much bigger than mine, \* opening up to deeper relationships and connections with the families and with the Bedford community.

The task force has not only solved problems for particular families, but solved problems about giving. I learned that giving is a lot more complicated than I thought. Christmas giving was particularly tricky. Families in Bedford wanted to give. They wanted to share the giving experience with their kids. However what we found was that the families at the hotel really wanted gift cards. BORING for the giver, but so empowering to the moms who could get really what they needed and what their kids wanted. We have always tried to prioritize the hotel families’ needs over the givers wants. We hope it is all about empowering the families to help themselves and feel supported by the community.

At the November 2015 task force meeting the state made a big announcement. They announced the Bedford Plaza Hotel was one of the hotels that the state had decided to stop using for emergency housing. The state announced they were giving the housing vouchers to the residents in the hotels they were closing. The process to get the vouchers and housing is complicated. Many got vouchers and housing right way and were out before the New Year and others are still struggling to find homes. There are currently only a few families left and soon they will be gone. \*
The end of March concludes the work many of us have done for the homeless families living at the Bedford Plaza Hotel.

The town of Bedford has changed through this process. The fact that the town formed the Hotel Task Force is remarkable. Other towns with emergency shelters do not have such a great team working together. The different parts of the town came together to make the new residents in Bedford feel welcomed and provide all that we could. I have found that this community is much more than a charming town center. Bedford definitely deserves to be one of the 100 Best Communities. Here is a quote from the American Promise Alliance who sponsors the award “Our work is powered by our belief that all children are capable of learning and thriving, and that every individual, institution and sector shares the responsibility to help young people succeed.” Bedford has certainly done this in supporting the families at the Bedford Plaza Hotel.

I have changed too. To be honest I have never had a regular spiritual practice. Reflecting on my work at the hotel for this sermon has been one of my first spiritual processes. After the fact I have realized I have been doing God work. It has been amazing to share this with so many in the community, get their perspective on the hotel, and learn about their spiritual practices. I have realized that every one approaches their relationship with God differently. I have also realized that my volunteer edge has expanded more than I ever expected. I have learned I love sitting with others around tables discussing struggles and problem solving different things in our community. It started bringing parents together to play with their kids - then solving problems about homelessness, giving, and respect. And finally with the vestry at St. Paul’s we are discussing connecting this community as it is growing. As the opportunity to help the families at the Bedford Plaza Hotel comes to an end, I look forward to other opportunities in our town to bring the community together. \*
 I hope to find more hidden doors to open.