



OPEN DOORS

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It's good to be back with you this morning. We had a great whirlwind trip to see Karin's family in Chicago and Ann Arbor. I had only been to Chicago one other time about 20 years ago, and I'd never been anywhere in Michigan, so it was fun to explore both towns a little bit. Each one had its own unique feel. Chicago of course is a high power town and very impressive. We drove by the house from Home Alone, saw all the mansions along Lake Michigan, rode the train into town, ate some deep dish pizza and stared at all the massive buildings. At one point, we met a man who asked us where we were from. When we told him he said, "I knew you weren't from here." I said, "Oh really? Why was that?" He said, "You don't have a Chicago attitude." He had kind of this half smile on his face and he never clarified whether that was a compliment or an insult. But he was right – people from Chicago tend to have a big city vibe about them.

We then drove a couple hundred miles and a couple states over to Ann Arbor, which had a completely different feel. You could tell right away you were in a college town, with all kinds of funky, hip stores and delis. You could jog from the suburbs to downtown instead of taking an hour to commute 3 miles. Things in Ann Arbor seemed a little more laid back. Instead of designer suits and expensive stores you had jeans and granola. And nobody there seemed to even notice me or my attitude.

Two very different cities with very distinct personalities. As I compared my impressions of those two places, I thought about the cities of Revelation, and just how well Jesus knew their different personalities. He had his finger on the pulse of Ephesus. He knew the attitude of people from Smyrna. He could identify the subtle differences between Pergamum and Sardis and the exact vibe given off by Thyatira. No two were the same, and Jesus targeted his letters to each one in a way that reflected what was going on in that specific town.

Jesus also knows NE Tacoma and Federal Way. He knows and he cares about what is quirky and unique to New Day, the struggles and challenges we face in trying to be all in, all out and all up for him. And the beauty of these letters of his is that for as specific as they get, they still communicate universal truth just as powerfully to our situation as they did to each of those cities.

This morning we're looking at the sixth of those letters, written to the church in Philadelphia. Once again, it is a city with a distinct setting all its own. Jesus tells John what he sees going on there.

Revelation 3:7-13

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

There is a verse in Isaiah that I love that looks ahead to Jesus and says he won't break a bruised reed. He's careful not to crush us when we are fragile. You can see that kind of care in this letter. One of the things that stands out about it is that it contains no reprimand from Jesus. He has only encouraging words for this battered congregation that is barely hanging on.

You might have heard before that the name Philadelphia means "city of brotherly love". When William Penn founded the city by that name in Pennsylvania, he wanted it to be a place where people got along. As a Quaker, he had experienced persecution for being different, and he wanted that city to stand for greater tolerance.

But the city of Philadelphia mentioned in the Bible got its name as the city of brotherly love from two real live brothers. Eumenes and Attalus . Eumenes was a king who founded the city around 189 BC. While he was on the throne, his little brother Attalus had two different occasions where he had the opportunity to stage a coup and become king in his brother's stead. The Romans were actually encouraging him to do it. But Attalus said no – he was too devoted to his brother to stab him in the back like that. So he earned the nickname "Philadelphos", or "that guy who loves his brother" and the city was then named after him.

Brotherly love may have been the foundation, but that sure didn't seem to be the main character quality of its people by the time this letter was written. The main crisis was that tensions were high between some members of the Jewish community in that town and the

Christians. They were clashing. As had happened in some of the other cities, the church had come under attack by a group of Jewish leaders who turned on them and began to excommunicate them from synagogue worship. We've already talked about how most of the early Christians were converts from Judaism. They actually saw their belief in Jesus as just an extension of their Jewish faith, so they naturally wanted to keep going to the synagogue, because that's where they always went to worship. But some of these Jewish leaders were saying, "You're wrong about who Jesus is. You're not believing in the real God. You're not part of the real people of God. You're no longer welcome here. You've betrayed your heritage."

To be shut out like that is hurtful and distressing. It makes you ask the question, "What if they're right?" The church was hanging in there, but just barely.

So Jesus comes to this with a different message than he has delivered to the others, and I find it somewhat surprising. Instead of saying something like, "Everything's going to be okay" or "I'm so sorry it's been so rough," He says, "I'm the great door opener."

He goes on to say that he has opened a door for the church in Philadelphia that nobody could shut. As unexpected as that word from Christ might sound, I think it is the heart of this letter. It's the heart because it provides both comfort and a challenge. The comfort comes in knowing Christ holds the master key and is in total control even when the world feels chaotic. The challenge is to step through the open door Jesus says is in front of them and us.

With each of these letters, we've been identifying a word that Jesus hoped would characterize that church. For Ephesus it was love. For Smyrna, it was courage. For Pergamum it was purity. For Thyatira it was endurance. And for Sardis, it was self-awareness – seeing themselves clearly. Each of these qualities is essential for New Day as well as we seek to live for Christ in our culture. Those are markers of a healthy church.

What I think Jesus is looking for in Philadelphia is **responsiveness**. He is hoping the church will respond to his invitation of the open door.

I'm kind of partial to this imagery, because back when I was working in advertising, one of my main clients for many years was Simpson Door Company. I have spent more time than any normal person should thinking about doors. And when we would go to different homes to shoot photography of these doors in real life settings to use in catalogs and advertisements, we would almost always try to have the door be open in the picture. Why? Because an open door sends a different message than a closed one. An open door is an invitation. An open door says there is something beyond where you are right now. And an open door represents a choice that needs to be made.

Because an **open door does you no good if you never cross the threshold**. When it's closed, you don't have to concern yourself with what's on the other side. It's off limits. But when the door is open, you are immediately confronted with a decision as to whether

or not you will go through it. Because it means you're allowed in. What will be your response to that invitation?

Jesus tells this church he has placed before them an open door that no one can shut. If we're going to apply this letter to our own lives, if we're going to consider our own response, the question before us this morning is: What is the door Jesus is talking about?

Scholars have argued about that, finding two main ways to interpret the symbol of a door in this passage. Both opinions have compelling Biblical support. As I looked at their logic, it seemed to me that they were both talking about the same door, just standing on opposite sides of it and seeing it from different vantage points.

The front side of the door is what I would call the **Door of Welcome**. Look again at what Jesus said:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

This verse needs some historical background, because it is actually a reference to a verse in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Way back when King Hezekiah was on the throne of Judah, he had a chief of staff who was in charge of everything in the palace. He was the one who controlled access to the king, and his name was Shebna. He had a tremendous amount of power. But Shebna was corrupt and looking out for his own interests, and God had had enough of him. So God announced through Isaiah that he was going to replace Shebna with a more honorable official, named Eliakim. And here's what God said through Isaiah:

Isaiah 22:22-23

I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

From that point on, Eliakim was granted the authority to decide who to allow into the king's presence. Nobody could overrule him, because God himself had given Eliakim that power.

Think back to what we said about the church in Philadelphia. This was a group that had been shunned by part of the Jewish community. Their enemies were essentially saying they had the power to block these Christians from God and his kingdom.

But Jesus says, "They don't hold the keys to this kingdom – I do. And I say this door is not shut. It is wide open. Not only will I let you in – I will give you a permanent place in my home." You can start to see why that message would be the one this church needed to hear.

Jesus has opened that same door for us. We're invited to enter God's household the same way. Paul wrote to the church in Rome and said,

Romans 5:1-2

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Because of Jesus, the way to God is wide open. Sometimes we think it's a shut door. Maybe we've tried to shut it ourselves by choosing to not believe in God. Maybe we think we've done so many terrible things that God would never accept us. Maybe we're proud and stubborn and we'd rather find our own way than resort to God's. Or maybe we just think we've ignored the door for so long that it has to be closed by now.

But nobody can shut what God says is open. He wants a relationship with you. And he has gone to great lengths to keep that door open as long as possible.

Back during what was known as "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland, one of the first casualties was a police officer named Michael Willetts. On the evening of May 25th, 1971, a terrorist entered the lobby of the Springfield Road Police Station in Belfast. He carried in a suitcase bomb with a smoking fuse, quickly dropped it and ran out. A police officer raised an alarm.

Sgt. Willetts was on duty in another part of the building when he heard the shouts. He rushed into the lobby and began to help evacuate adults and children to another area of the building. He took it upon himself to hold open the door for them until everyone got through safely. When they were all on the far side of the door, he then stood in the doorway, shielding the group with his own body. In that moment, the bomb exploded and Sgt. Willetts was mortally wounded. But not one of the people he rescued was harmed. The survivors all agreed that had it not been for Sgt. Willetts opening and keeping that door open, there would not have been time for them to make it out.

Sometimes we lose sight of the significance and cost of what Jesus was doing on the cross. He gave up his own life to hold open a way for us to escape into God. Jesus told his disciples,

John 10:9

I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved.

Jesus shields everyone who runs through that door. And he is saying to you this morning, "It is still open. Step through today."

If you've never understood how to begin a relationship with Christ, if you'd like to walk through that door, but you don't know how, it's very simple. All you have to do is acknowledge what he's done and tell him you want it to apply to you. In fact, I'm going to pause right here in our service and pray a prayer, because I don't want to push it off to later. It's too important. God is holding a door open for you. You can make this your prayer, and have a new connection with God from this point forward.

Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross. Thank you for taking all the punishment for sin on yourself even though you hadn't done anything wrong. I believe that what you did applies to me. I believe you rose again and that your resurrection means I can have hope for eternal life too. I want to be part of your family. I want to step through that open door today and open the door of my heart at the same time. Please come into my life. Please forgive me for everything that stands between me and you and direct my life from this point forward. Amen.

There's nothing magic about those particular words. People have prayed the same idea in many different ways. But if you prayed that from the heart, Christ is now in you and he will never leave you. A new thing has begun in you. You have walked through the door of welcome, and God is thrilled that you have taken him up on his invitation. Nothing delights him more than when his kids come home. And I pray that if you didn't pray that prayer today, now that you know how to do it, you'll do it soon. There is so much waiting for you on the other side of that door.

That's the front side of this door Jesus spoke of to the church in Philadelphia. He has unlocked the way into God's kingdom and nobody can bar us from his presence.

But presumably, most of the people in that church had already responded to Christ's invitation to become part of God's family through him. That was why they were under attack – for choosing Jesus. While they needed reassurance that they had made the right choice, they had in a sense already stepped through that door.

So when Jesus says he has placed an open door before them, it can have a secondary meaning as well, and I see this as the **Door of Opportunity**. Throughout the New Testament, when there are references to an open door, it is almost always talking about a window of time God has opened up.

The opportunities talked about in those verses all have a common theme: they're all about sharing the message of the gospel. In other words, it is an open door to tell others about the open door Christ has made.

The funny thing about this door is that it doesn't look the way we might expect it to. The church in Philadelphia was weak and small. They were being attacked. So they would be the last people you would think Jesus would see as having a great opportunity for being a witness. If it were me, I would want somebody who was doing really well with all the advantages of good connections, maybe somebody who was popular with a little star quality to them. But that's not how it works with God's open doors.

One of my favorite lines on this topic comes from Paul. Writing to the church in Corinth, he says,

1 Corinthians 16:8-9

But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

That's hilarious to me, because when I have people who oppose me, I consider that a shut door! My definition of open means people who are open to hearing what I have to say. Paul didn't see any connection between the way his message would be received and the opportunity God was placing in front of him.

Nothing can shut what God has opened. Many of you know, Jennie Kind, who directs our children's ministries here at New Day. She has discovered that God has placed an open door in front of her that didn't look at all like she expected. I'm going to ask her to come and share with us a little about what that has been like.

JENNIE'S STORY

Last Sunday, we attended Winetka Bible Church just outside Chicago. That morning, a young man named Austin got up and shared how God had been putting it on his heart to talk to his coworkers about Jesus. He said the main thing he had learned was how much he needed to focus on his own need for a Savior. He realized he couldn't approach other people as somebody offering solutions but as somebody who was in the same place as them, needing Jesus just as much. He said he camped out in Psalm 51, David's cry of repentance. And as he kept his own conscience clean before God, he began to sense God leading in who to reach out to.

One of those people was a coworker named David, who was about 20 years older than Austin. The two had virtually nothing in common, so it was absurd to think anything would come of it. But Austin continued to pray and look for those open doors.

Well David was there in church Sunday morning, and he then stood up to tell the rest of the story from his viewpoint. He did not look like a typical churchgoer from the Midwest. He was a big tough looking guy with black cowboy boots and a black shirt and jet black hair slicked back on his head. But he was just beaming as he got up to talk. Initially, he said, he had ignored Austin's repeated invitations to church. He said he was like a door to door salesman ringing his bell. "Do you want to come to church with me?" "No!" Slam. It happened over and over. .

Meanwhile, David's life was getting more and more desperate. He was searching everywhere else for a contact point with God and not finding it. About the closest thing he had to a spiritual experience was this dream he had had eight years earlier that was more like a vision where he could see himself as a kid riding a bike, and he could hear a line from a song saying "When I was a little boy." It had this profound emotional impact that had always stuck with him. But that was about it. Nothing really was taking him closer to God. Then Austin came along and wouldn't give up. Finally, David said in a half prayer, "Okay, God, if you're real, give me a sign." The next day he went to lunch with Austin. Austin asked him again about coming to church. And just as he did, what should come on the radio but that song from his dream, "When I was a little boy".

That did it. He went to church with Austin. When he did that, God grabbed ahold of him in a big way and David invited Christ into his life. So here he was this past Sunday, the most unlikely looking new member of the congregation, giving a shout out to God. He said, "My life before was a wilderness. Now it's this beautiful pasture with rainbows and butterflies." Everyone kind of laughed at that, and he said, "I'm not even kidding."

And he told the congregation, "Keep ringing that bell. You don't know how many times it's going to take. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Austin. How do you thank a man who saved your life?"

What open door of opportunity has God put in front of you? Maybe it's something as wild as going halfway around the world to help teach a Vacation Bible School. Or maybe it's the even wilder idea of just going to work and showing the love of Christ to the person in the next cubicle. What makes it an opportunity is not how logical it is or how receptive the other person is. What makes it an opportunity is if God says it is open. If he has put you in a place where you have the ear and the trust of someone who doesn't yet know him, then he is setting an open door in front of you.

With our Lent calendar and our blog, we are marking down the days leading up to Easter. Out of the whole year, Easter is a time when people are most likely to turn their attention toward things of God. For whatever reason, more people visit church on Easter Sunday than any other time during the year.

To me, that makes right now a wide open door of opportunity. Wouldn't it be great if God worked through this church in a mighty way to stand in that doorway and usher a bunch of people through into a relationship with him. That's what being a church is all about – showing people the door that is Jesus.

Here's a challenge to you this morning: I'd like you to think of three people you know who as of yet have not put their faith in Jesus. They may seem as far away from him as possible. I'm not asking you to try and think of who is most likely to become a Christian – just any three people you have a relationship with. What I would like you to do is write their names down on these little cards.

You're not handing these in – these are for you. If you're afraid someone might see it, you can write the names in code for all I care. But then between now and Easter, will you commit yourself to praying for those people? Pray for God's blessing on them. Pray for specific needs you know they have. Pray that God will give you more love for them and ways to show that love. And pray that he will draw them into a relationship with himself.

God has placed us here for a reason. What is the open door in front of you and me today? How will we respond?

