

“Open”
Acts 16:16-34
7th Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville
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A number of years ago, before my wife and I were married,
but after we had started dating,
she posed a question to me that gave me pause:

“Ben,” she said, “Why don’t you ever open doors for me when we’re out on a date?”

She wasn’t angry...just curious.

It’s true, I never did it.
Not the car door. Not the restaurant door. Nada.

In fact, I had been known to walk straight in front of her and open the door for myself, but then forget to hold it open as it slammed back in my future wife’s face.

Not exactly the best way to win oneself into a woman’s heart.

Little did Heather know back then, however, that my habit of not opening doors had a deeper history than my own cluelessness. Believe it or not, I had been TAUGHT to do what I did.

You see, I attended a small, liberal arts college in Minnesota. Like many small colleges, this one had its own culture, its customs, things that were ok and not ok to do on that campus.

And I learned very quickly at Carleton that one custom NOT OK was to open a door for a woman. Why? Well, some of the women there felt that it was a paternalistic action...they could open the doors for themselves quite well, thank you.

Now I don’t care this morning whether you think that’s a good thing or a silly thing or whatever...my point is simply this: at the moment I met my future wife, my mind was made up: don’t open her door!

But then we started dating, and she presented another side to this question, and I began to see things differently.

Now I feel like I can go either way.
Open the door. Not open the door.
I'm an OPEN PERSON on the subject of opening doors...

Why did I think of that story this morning?

I thought of it because of that one word—OPEN—
it's a very important word to the Gospel writer Luke.

For example...do you remember the Emmaus story in Luke?
How the risen Christ joins two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and they do not recognize him?

But then Jesus shares a meal with them—
“he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.”

And what does Luke say happens next?

“...their eyes were opened, and they recognized him...”

Staying in the same chapter, Jesus then appears to the eleven disciples.
Those disciples, Luke says, are “disbelieving and still wondering...”

So what happens next?

Luke writes, “...he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...”

Open minds, open eyes—Luke has a fondness for this word.
In fact, he picks up this word again in the book of Acts.

In our text two Sundays ago, Peter had a vision.
What happened in the vision?
“The heaven opened...” says Luke.

And because of Peter's vision in which the heaven opened, Cornelius—this Roman centurion—is welcomed by Peter, and then Gentiles are accepted into God's church.

In other words, it wasn't just heaven that opened.
With Peter's vision, the early church *became more open....*

All that is backdrop to our text for today...

Paul and Silas are in prison.
Suddenly there's an earthquake.
The foundations of the prison are shaken...

“immediately all the doors were opened” Luke writes.

And Paul and Silas run away to their freedom!
Is that what Luke says?
That's not what Luke says.

When the prison doors are open, something strange takes place.
Paul and Silas do not leave the prison.

Think about that.
They've been beaten and flogged and jailed and chained.
And right when they have a chance to get out...they stay put.

Why do they stay?
Why do they stick around until the jailer finds them there?

I think Luke is trying to tell us something about being OPEN.

When Paul and Silas could have focused on what was best for them...they turned their attention to a stranger.

In other words, *they opened their lives to that jailer.*
They decided to care about the jailer.
They were the prisoners, but they extended kindness and warmth and openness toward their jailer.

There was no guarantee how that jailer would respond!

How many of you have been on our church website?

If you go on our church website, what's the first description that one sees of Westminster?

OPEN MINDS
OPEN HEARTS

I like that vision for our church.

I agree with that vision for our church.

That vision is one of the reasons I felt called to be pastor at our church.

What does being open mean for Westminster Presbyterian Church?

The same thing it meant for Paul and Silas.

Creating space in our hearts for the stranger.

Creating a community where welcoming someone whom we don't know takes first priority, where hospitality is NUMBER ONE.

When I was serving my former church in Bloomington, Indiana, there was another pastor in the Presbytery named Jack Cormack. Jack tells of the day when a visitor came to his church. He sat down in one of the pews, and got ready for worship.

And a long-time member of the church walked in just before worship started. She went up to that visitor, and she said, "Excuse me. You're sitting in my place."

And the visitor stood up and gave the member her seat.

And then that visitor started walking—but not to a new seat. He walked right out the doors of Jack Cormack's church, and never returned again.

Now if I had been pastor at Jack's church, I don't know that I could've restrained myself. I imagine saying something to that church member, being very direct, asking her if she really thinks she owns that pew.

But Jack didn't operate that way.

Instead of singling that woman out, Jack Cormack got the Worship Committee together, and they came up with a plan. One Sunday, they printed different color bulletins:

red, green, blue, pink...

And at the start of worship, Jack made everyone in church stand up, and go sit with the other people who had the same color bulletin.

Well, the congregation was squirming in their seats, turning the wrong way, getting whiplash trying to figure out where their friends were. He said it was the most uncomfortable day his church had experienced in years.

It OPENED things up...

Now I'm not suggesting multiple colored bulletins for our church.

I am suggesting that being OPEN, practicing hospitality and welcome requires intentionality and effort and paying attention to the people around you...

When was the last time you didn't look for your friends after worship, but tried to find someone who is a new face to you, and you went out of your way to greet that person, to welcome that person, to open your hands and your heart to that person who is a stranger to you?

It's what Paul and Silas did.
They weren't sitting in a sanctuary.
They were sitting in jail.

But when the prison doors were opened, instead of fleeing from their jail cell, they turned their attention to the stranger, the other...

And it saved the jailer's life.

And how did the jailer respond?

By extending hospitality to them.

“At that same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds...He brought them up into the house and set food before them...”

Look, I believe hospitality is already a strength of our church.
So how do we build on that strength?
How do we grow in our OPENNESS toward others?

Here’s an example.

I was very pleased this past spring when our Session approved a motion to put new signage around our church.

Now someone might ask, “Why would we do that? I know my way around our church.”

It may be true for most of you.
But not for visitors.
Not for people who are entering our doors for the first time, or the second time, or even the twenty-second time.

Did you know, for example, that even after being here almost a year, I still get turned around as I make my way through our church facility? Heck, I didn’t know what the Friendship Court was until I had been here six months!

Leigh told some of you about the time that she found me wandering through the halls.

“Ben, where are you headed?”
“Oh, I’m going to the Weekday School.”
“Uh, no you’re not! You’re headed toward the columbarium!”

Don’t misunderstand.
It’s a gorgeous facility.

It’s just a BIG facility.
And it can be confusing.

So at some point in the coming months, we'll have new signage put up, both outside and inside, signs that are designed to help people who are new to Westminster find their way around.

It's one good way to say we're OPEN...we want you here.

Have you given any thought recently as to how our church can be more hospitable, more open?

It's an important question during this particular moment in time:
 when xenophobia is on the rise,
 when anti-Semitism is on the rise,
 when fear of the OTHER gets a lot of play...

Years ago, the late pastor Ernest Campbell was serving a church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was 1963. JFK had just been assassinated. And a member of Campbell's church gave him a call.

This member suggested that one thing they might be able to do to partially redeem the tragedy would be to provide Marina Oswald—
 the widow of Lee Harvey Oswald—
 with an opportunity to improve her English.

She had expressed this wish and wanted to stay in the U.S.

The church made its plans, and in due time, while a battery of reporters waited hawkishly at the airport, Marina Oswald slipped into the community at night by train. She lived under cover with a family in the congregation until the church finally was forced to issue a press release.

Then the mail started coming in.

Some were quick and hot to say that the church's actions were unpatriotic. Others said the move wasn't wise, others that it was unfair. One woman wrote that she had belonged to the church for forty years, and everything it had done for her could fit on the back of a postage stamp.

Others simply said the church was grossly un-American.

Campbell answered every letter. No one was ignored. But what he said to each person who criticized their church was this:

“The one thing you haven’t shown us is that what we have done is unlike Christ.”¹

Christ, who opened his arms to tax collectors and sinners,
to fishermen and to Pharisees,
to the mistreated and marginalized of his
day...

What does it mean to be OPEN—
in your life of faith or in the life of this church?

Might it mean spending the night with a family from IHN, when you’ve never spent the night with a family from IHN?

Might it mean going on one of our church mission trips, when you’ve never been on one of our church mission trips?

Look, being open and welcoming toward those we do not know is at the CORE of our Christian identity. It’s one of the most fundamental expressions of God’s love that we have.

What does Jesus say in the Gospel of Matthew?

“I was a stranger, and you welcomed me...”

How does the writer of Hebrews put it?

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The Apostle Paul sure knew what it was like to be welcomed, to be accepted by God...

¹ Ernest T. Campbell, “Follow Me,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, edited by Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994.

Maybe that's why he refused to leave the jailer.

Because God had welcomed Paul, refused to leave Paul,
 Paul and Silas refused to leave the jailer,
 and opened their hands and hearts toward him...

And you and I can do the same.
 We don't have to be in jail.
 We just have to be intentional when we come to church.

What if I gave everyone here a goal of getting to know 5 new people who
 come to church at Westminster before the end of the year.

Could you do it?
 Would you do it?

Someone's saying, "Eh, I'm not going to do it."
 Don't make up your mind.
 Don't close your mind.

Keep it open....

Let me put it like this:

Does anyone here remember the musical Camelot—the song, "If Ever I
 Would Leave You"...does anyone remember this?

Early 1960's, I think.
 Robert Goulet, Julie Andrews.
 Goulet is Sir Lancelot, and he sings to Guenevere:

**If ever I would leave you, it wouldn't be in summer.
 Seeing you in summer I never would go.
 Your hair streaked with sun-light,
 Your lips red as flame,
 Your face with a luster that puts gold to shame!**

But if I'd ever leave you, it couldn't be in autumn.

**How I'd leave in autumn I never will know.
I've seen how you sparkle when fall nips the air.
I know you in autumn and I must be there.**

**And could I leave you running merrily through the snow?
Or on a wintry evening when you catch the fire's glow?**

**If ever I would leave you, how could it be in spring-time?
Knowing how in spring I'm bewitched by your so?
Oh, no! Not in spring-time, summer, winter, or fall!
No, never could I leave you at all!**

Now...why didn't Robert Goulet just come out on stage and say to Julie Andrews, "Eh, maybe I'll stay..."

I think you know.

There's a difference—
a world of difference—
when someone says, "Maybe I'll stay..."
and that same person says, "I never want to leave."²

You know what the difference is?

In church, that difference is you...

Amen.

² For the idea of using "If Every I Would Leave You" in this way, I am indebted to a lecture by Dr. Fred Craddock.