

January 31, 2016

Open Doors
Revelation 3:7-13

Opening Words: Today, we are instructed from the last book of the Bible, Revelation. It was written about the year 95 by the only apostle who died of natural causes, John. Near the end of his life, he was exiled by the Roman government to the island of Patmos. They wanted to limit his influence, without martyring him. It is while he is on that desolate island that he has a series of as many as 21 visions. Revelation is the recorded version of those visions. Our reading for today comes from the very first vision. It is the easiest vision to understand.

In this vision, Christ writes to seven different Christian congregations which are approximately fifty miles apart. Each letter is individualized. Jesus addressed the Christian congregations in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. It is the letter to Philadelphia that grabs our attention today. Christ tells this congregation to seize every opportunity. It could have been written to us. The question is, are we seizing all of our opportunities? Our scripture lesson for today is Revelation 3:7-13. Let me call this message *Open Doors*.

Revelation 3:7-13 ⁷“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. ⁸I 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹²The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them 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 them my new name. ¹³Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Alexander Graham Bell said, "*Sometimes we stare at a door that is closing so long that we miss the one that is open.*" That quote is about opportunity and is the perfect beginning for this morning's message. How many open doors are we missing? If you think you can remember that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

In his autobiography, *Just as I Am*, Billy Graham tells about a conversation he had with John F. Kennedy shortly after his election:

"On the way back to the Kennedy house, the president-elect stopped the car and turned to me. 'Do you believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ?' he asked. 'I most certainly do.' 'Well, does my church believe it?' 'They have it in their creeds,' I responded. 'They don't preach it,' Kennedy said. 'They don't tell us much about it. I'd like to know what you think.' I explained what the Bible said about Christ coming the first time, dying on the Cross, rising from the dead, and then promising that he would come back again. 'Only then,' I said, 'are we going to have permanent world peace.' 'Very interesting,' he said, looking away. 'We'll have to talk more about that someday.' And he drove on."

Several years later, the two met again, at the 1963 National Prayer Breakfast. "I had the flu," Graham remembers. "After I gave my short talk, and he gave his, we walked out of the hotel to his car together, as was always our custom. At the curb, he turned to me. 'Billy, could you ride back to the White House with me? I'd like to see you for a minute.' 'Mr. President, I've got a fever,' I protested. 'Not only am I weak, but I don't want to give you this thing. Couldn't we wait and talk some other time?' It was a cold, snowy day, and I was freezing as I stood there without my overcoat. 'Of course,' he said graciously." But the two would never meet again. Later that year, Kennedy was assassinated. Graham comments, "His hesitation at the car door, and his request, haunts me still. What was on his mind? Should I have gone with him? It was an irrecoverable moment." What is Billy Graham really saying? He is lamenting the fact that he may have missed an opportunity to save a soul. How many opportunities have you missed in your life?

Webster defines an opportunity as, "a chance, especially one that offers some kind of advantage." We understand the term 'opportunity' because we live in the land of opportunity. We are months away from the national election, but we are overwhelmed with political news. Is anyone here already tired of the election? Is anyone here still uncertain of who to vote for because they all look flawed? This is a good time to remind you that the United States of America is still the land of opportunity. If you have ever traveled outside of our country, you know what I say is true. (I don't mean your cruise to the western Caribbean, your vacation to Cancun or your fast trip to Niagara Falls.) The reason so many people want to come to America isn't that we are a little smarter or a little better looking. The reason people want to come to America is that America is still the land of opportunity. We may be the most opportunistic land in the history of the world. The bridge that links twenty-first century America and first century Philadelphia is that little word, *opportunity*. Let us look at this special delivery together.

We are in the third chapter of Revelation. Jesus is writing a letter to this Christian congregation in the city of Philadelphia. That city is not located in eastern Pennsylvania, the home of the Eagles, Phillies or Flyers. However, in both cases, in Eastern Pennsylvania and in Asia Minor, the name means "Brotherly Love." It commemorates the loyalty and devotion of two brothers, Attalus II (220-130 B.C.) and Eumenes (362-316 BC). Jesus was writing to a congregation in a city that was commercially important.

However, what is of more importance to us than background, is content—what the letter says. How does this piece of scripture help us to be a little more like Jesus?

I have read this letter countless times and I have found that verse eight is the key. Listen to that verse with me. It says, *"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."* In one verse, Jesus rewards past deeds; they have been faithful. However, he also comments on future challenges; a door is open that can't be shut. Using your sanctified imagination you can visualize Jesus holding the door open. The question is: where does that door lead? Some people will say it is a door of opportunity, others say it is a door that leads one to the Kingdom of God. Regardless, the door leads to a better world.

This is the good news for today. Jesus is still holding the door open for our generation. There is still an opportunity for a better world. All you have to do is walk through the door. I am going to focus in on two areas. Every day you have the opportunity to improve **yourself**. Every day you have the opportunity to improve your **church**. Thomas Edison once said, *"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."* I hope you don't miss out on these opportunities! So if you are ready to look at three opportunities of improvement, say, **"Amen!"**

Yourself

In the fifth chapter of Mark, Jesus finds himself in the land of Gerasenes. Jesus is welcomed by a unique man. Do you remember the story? He is not the most attractive man. He is dirty and smelly. He has been living in the caves in his birthday suit. His only outstanding characteristic is his strength. He has broken the chains that were to restrict him. Even his behavior is unrestricted. We are told in the story that his behavior is the result of demon possession. How many demons are inside this individual? There are so many that they simply call themselves "Legion". In time, Jesus exorcises the demons and sends them into a herd of 2,000 pigs. The pigs run down a steep slope into the water. They die, and all the animal rights activists go crazy. However, the once demon possessed man is suddenly dressed and in his right mind. There are many divine truths in this story, but one comes forward for our use today. Once you encounter Jesus, you have the opportunity to improve yourself.

Jesus has opened the door! You have the opportunity to improve yourself. It isn't just true of the demon possessed man. There are countless stories in history of people who walked through the open door and improved themselves. John Wesley improved himself. John Newton, the composer of *Amazing Grace*, improved himself. The question is, are you going to improve yourself? What is it about yourself that you would like to change? What is it about yourself that is holding you back from a closer walk with God? The door is open! What are you doing to improve yourself? And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Your Church

Grace Coolidge, the wife of President Calvin Coolidge, tried to surprise her husband by having his portrait painted. When it was finished, she hung it in the library of the White House. Later the same morning the President happened to walk into the library accompanied by a senator. They stared at the picture together in silence. Finally, Coolidge commented quietly: "I think so, too." Why can't people be more like Calvin Coolidge? Why can't people keep their comments to themselves?

There are six things you can say that will stifle any good idea in the life of the church. Have you ever said any of these things?

1. It will never work.
2. We've never done it that way before.
3. We're doing fine without it.
4. We can't afford it.
5. We're not ready for it.
6. It's not our responsibility.

I have been in the ministry for over thirty years. I have learned a few things along the way. However, I have never understood why people who do nothing try to stop the people who want to do something. I know it sounds crazy, but I see it all the time. I hear those stories all the time. When was the last time you discouraged someone from trying to do something? When was the last time you critically critiqued someone else's efforts? No wonder people stop trying. However, let me say this clearly. There is nothing worse than an inactive church. Churches by their very nature are designed to be open and alive. That is why I applaud the people that have taken the leadership to do something extra. Jesus has opened the door! You have the opportunity to improve your church. What are you doing to improve this church? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Let me end with this story.

In the May 1991 edition of Pulpit Helps, a former pastor of the First Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas wrote these words:

"We missed him. Our chance to change things came and passed and we did not know it was there. A dark-skinned little boy sat through Sunday School classes for three years, but everyone missed him. His name was Sirhan Sirhan, and at age 24 he shot and killed Senator Robert Kennedy. In a welter of words and the shudder of grief throughout our nation, the persistent thought keeps recurring...someone missed him."

That church missed their opportunity; I hope we don't miss our opportunities. Jesus has opened the door for us. It is a door of opportunity. Chuck Swindoll once said, "*We are faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as impossible situations.*" Jesus has opened your door of opportunity. Why don't we walk through? And all of **God's** people said, "**Amen!**"