

John 10: 1-6, 9 (NIV)

Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.^[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture.

Do we have any 76ers fans in here today? As you know, Gina and I are in the middle of a sermon series on Doors, and we've been basing our messages on a book by Joyce Rupp - Open the Door: A Journey to the True Self. Last week, Pastor Gina spoke of the spiritual value that comes from closing certain doors along our journey and the chapter of Joyce's book I am focused on this week is about Opening Doors. As I read through this chapter, and as I thought about the scripture for today, I kept getting this clear image in my head that you 76ers fans should know well...it says "Trust the process!" (**Explain**)

This idea of opening and closing doors is one that I think is easy to understand, but also one that can prove difficult to live out, because we must continually battle through this internal conflict of what we sometimes think are the right doors to open and walk through versus where Jesus is actually telling us to go. Or perhaps there is fear when we think about opening a new door.

At the same time, we live in a world that increasingly communicates to us that instantaneous gratification is what we should strive for...and makes it available. Look – I just ordered coffee filters and Amazon is going to bring them to me this afternoon. With the prevalence of Social media, we can receive instant gratification when someone likes, shares, or comments on a post. We can receive instant credit approval to purchase a car, that maybe...we can't really afford. I believe all this instant gratification can have a detrimental effect on our lives, because when we go to God in prayer we now start to expect the same. Perhaps worse, in an effort to achieve quick results, we may be keen to rely on quick and easy solutions to spiritual problems when in reality the gifts of patience and faithfulness are the things that are **most** necessary in our journey.

We're going to circle all the way back to this last point, but let's first go into today's scripture. I read this past week of a preacher who spoke of his life in Africa. He told how the people of a village would know each other's sheep the way we know each other's children. One might ask another, have you seen my sheep "so-and-so", identifying his own sheep by name. Moreso, the sheep themselves know to whom they belong – I suppose that's like the relationship we have with our own pets 🐾. Here

was the type of environment where Jesus found himself in this morning's scripture, very common for that time and place, so his words about the sheep were couched in a practical reality and not simply intended to create an illustration of his relationship with us. In John Chapter 9, the people to whom Jesus is now speaking find themselves really questioning who he is and whether they can trust him. Is he really from God or simply some new "charlatan" about town? The verses in chapter 10 that we read this morning show Jesus finds a way to answer these questions that could be seen as both pragmatic and poetic. In verses 1-5, Jesus identifies himself as the true shepherd... someone who sees it as his personal responsibility to safeguard our own journey. And yet, Verse 6 tells us that the Pharisees did not understand his words. So Jesus then pivots...and in Verse 10 he offers another way to understand his relationship to the people: "I am the gate" for the sheep. Here, we have a clear statement of identity...I am the gate, the door, the proper way, the only way into the sheep fold. Those who enter – who find pasture as the scripture says – are being saved.

Now one might wonder how Jesus can be both shepherd AND gate, but by being the good teacher and practical theologian he is, we can see how speaking of the gate allows Jesus to provide clarity to the image of the shepherd for the hearers of his word...his teaching. In both examples, it is about identifying the trustworthy one and following Jesus, whether it be as a leader (a shepherd) or a provider...one who opens the door and presents a path.

So when we read this scripture in John 10, we hear clearly that we are to trust Jesus. We know he is going to present opportunities for us to open doors to greater things. Yet, when we hear him knocking at the door as Gina covered through Revelation 3:20 a couple of Sundays ago, we can still be hesitant to open that door.

I am certain we have all experienced this...there are doors that may offer exciting potential and yet cause us to have fear or anxiety, perhaps so much so that we just want to throw a deadbolt on the door and run in a different direction or even just stay complacently in place. In Joyce Rupp's book, she brings quotes a poem from Margaret Atwood entitled The Door.

*The door swings open,
You look in.
It's dark in there,
Most likely spiders;
Nothing you want.
You feel scared.
The door swings closed.*

Is anyone else familiar with this line of thinking? Uncertainty that presents in fear and leads to inaction. As I think about this poem, I can contrast my own mindset from almost 20 years ago to where it was just earlier this year.

You see, in 2004 I was SO proud to have landed my first post-college job with 2 months to go before graduation...and it was the exact job I wanted, going into construction management with Pulte Homes right where I was among friends in Fredericksburg, VA. Absolutely determined to springboard into a successful career, I saw victory after victory in my first 2 years as I was promoted multiple times and was suddenly in line to become a General Manager when a new 2,000 home development would break ground in our local division of this national company, something unheard of in other divisions around the country...I thought I was looking through the door of my ultimate measure of success. I celebrated, I called family and friends, I reveled in this feeling of triumph. But what I know now is what I didn't realize back then...the Lord's ways are not our ways and climbing a corporate ladder may not be that ultimate pathway of success.

So a door closed that I hadn't seen coming...a tax dispute between the two prior owners of the land Pulte had purchased to build this new community brought our progress to a grinding halt, with no clear picture of when we might begin again. I've learned that companies don't hold onto employees for very long when there's little work to be done. Now here was a moment in time where I had a choice to make...with joblessness likely on the horizon, would I reconsider my priorities or would I go out of my way to continue chasing the singular vision of success in my life? Unfortunately, I chose the latter and uprooted myself to Raleigh, NC where, despite a deep need for connections that I've always had, I knew nobody. For a full year, I poured everything I had into my job, giving up so much in the meantime – connections with friends and family who were now farther away, disconnecting from any kind of faith family where I'd moved, and overlooking my health to point where a doctor eventually told me she was surprised I was still alive. Throughout the course of those 12 months, I heard the knock at the door many times, I felt a pull to run through the door to something else...but I couldn't bring myself to close the door on this career and open another door to something else.

In this book by Joyce Rupp, we find her advocating for solitude as a powerful way to unlock the door. She quotes Henri Nouwen who said: "It is in solitude that inner freedom can grow...in solitude we can slowly unmask the illusion of our possessiveness and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we can conquer, but what is given to us." Reading that really named my reality, my struggle. Up to that point I was too fixated on trying to conquer the wrong obstacles and to do so

on my own, to find worth and success in the wrong places...until I allowed for a moment of solitude. Alone in my apartment kneeling on the floor on a Sunday morning, lost in a sense of despair about the road ahead, the knocking grew louder, and louder. And my emotions began to take over.

But as my head lifted, my eyes landed on a Hillsong Worship DVD. (I put the DVD on and as the music played on my tv, I decided to gaze into that door from where the knocking arose, where I no longer saw the darkness and spiders when I was making the decision to move away from family, friends, and a faith community but instead I saw a light that was calling me away from that place. Moving back to NJ home, this church was one of the first places I came, where I was embraced by so many of you and began down the road of healing that so many years later has landed me here, where I can share the journey with you and speak of the power that comes from opening a door, even if it takes a long time.

I want to lift up something else very powerful from this chapter of Joyce Rupp's book. It's this idea that even once we have made the decision to open the door and walk through it, we must find ways to keep the doors of our heart in good working condition. Joyce uses the analogy of hinges on the door and notes how if we don't provide care and attention over time, then eventually the hinges will start to squeak, in need of an oil that can come in many forms - prayer that provides space for quiet reflection, trust to maintain confidence in the divine guidance that brought you through the door, love that manifests through generosity and other-centeredness, forgiveness to move beyond the memories of past hurt, faithfulness to assure the continuance of our daily efforts when we **think** nothing is happening, creativity that allows our innate gifts to see life so we can express our genuine selves, leisure that provides oil to renew our energy while clearing our mind and heart, surrender when we admit we need assistance to release our heart-door and.....patience.

Where we started this morning was with a reference to our hometown basketball team who created the refrain of Trust the Process. Opening the door that Jesus is knocking on is always just the first step in each part of our journey. Continuing to follow the call that Jesus puts in front of us is what we must do to truly uncover the impact our relationship with Jesus can have on us as well as the impact we can have for others, but friends please know that we must demonstrate patience. It's been 25 years since I first worshipped in this church, it's been 17 years since I came back to worship here for good, and I feel like I've landed in a place with this new position where I can be a clearer reflection of the love Jesus has for us all. Yet, I've also learned that while we continue to follow Jesus down the path he has laid out for us, patience is necessary and along the journey we must maintain our faithful activities – worship, prayer, reflection and the other oils we mentioned earlier that keep the hinges on our door healthy and vibrant.

Why should we trust that Jesus is the opener...hopefully you see it in my testimony today, that of others, or your own...but we also see over and over again in the New Testament scripture how Jesus is opening eyes, ears, hearts and minds – In Matthew 9, “then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you’; and their sight was restored.” In Mark 7, Jesus encounters a deaf man and we read “He looked up to the heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘*Ephphatha!*’ (which means ‘*Be opened!*’). At this, the man’s ears were opened.” In Acts 16 – the Lord opened the heart of a woman named Lydia to respond to Paul’s message and then in Luke 24, after Jesus encounters two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus only then to disappear, these two ask of each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road.” Time and time again we find evidence of Christ as the opener, but we do have to be careful. As the door to our most true self is opened, we must be careful not to be tricked by our ego into thinking we did this ourselves and therefore let anxiousness drive a desire to push and control our spiritual growth. After all, God’s power at work within us can accomplish abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine.

And when we cede control to the Lord, we begin to find ourselves more fulfilled as we make measurable impacts to others around us. I’d like to share one last quote from Canadian author Judith Campbell, who says:

When we don’t open ourselves to the spiritual opportunities that exist for us, it is like living our lives within only one windowless room of a house, never having explored the rest of the house or gone outside to see what awaits us there. And within this one room, we focus only on our physical being – on our basic needs that keep us alive and fuel an egocentric way of being. When we share this room with like-minded people, we remain stuck within this physical place, unable to see the light of day that calls to us from the other side.

When I think about our ASP trip this summer, I think about the 20 people who never went on a mission trip before yet opened a door that Jesus was knocking on leading them into ministry, I think about the students who gave up one of the last weeks of their summer, and I think of the adult leaders who gave up a week of precious time off from their jobs to be there, because they were heeding the call that came from that knocking. And then I think about the response when we came home from this trip – from those who stood up here to share testimony, from others who can’t wait to start planning next year’s trip, and from those who are now finding themselves wanting to dig even deeper into their faith. One of our students has approached me to understand more fully what it means to be speaking the good word in a setting like this because he has been so moved.

I have felt for a long time that I wanted to enter more deeply into ministry, but I didn’t go blast a hole in the wall to force something that maybe I wasn’t ready for yet. The

opportunity to be up here and share a message with each of you is a profound responsibility. The chance to lend my voice to the many, many different areas of ministry here at FMC can carry enormous weight and if not done carefully and prayerfully could lead to tension or anxiety. By opening my own heart-door 25 years ago on a similar mission trip, by volunteering with the youth and in other capacities in the subsequent years to eventually taking over the Youth Director role and then finding myself here today as FMC's Program Ministries Coordinator who gets to preach once a month, I can look back and see clearly the path the Lord created for me.

There's something awesome about the Lord opening doors (Repeat 2x)

Friends, it took me 25 years to get here. Along the way, there were so many doors that opened and many others that closed. I'm not sure where Jesus is leading me next, but I will trust him faithfully and pray that he uses me to strengthen our ministry at FMC in the years ahead. I will lean on the spirituals gift of prayer, faithfulness, love, and patience. This can happen for all of us if we listen and open the door of our hearts when Jesus is calling us to do just that. Trust the process.....and check out the doors God is opening for you. May it be so – Amen.