

“When God closes a door...”

- What came to your mind just then?
 - Perhaps you were thinking, that when God closes a door, another one opens
 - Or God opens a window, or adjusts the blinds,
 - Or whatever the ending of that phrase is for you
 - It sounds so simple, so easy... I wish it was that easy, don't you?
 - It is no small task for us as Christians to always hear and understand God's call, or God's plan, for us
 - The cliché is nice and neat, and it seems simple to see which door is open and which is closed, and there you go
 - But sometimes doors open for other reasons, sometimes they close and we are asked to persist
 - The instances in life when no door seems open, or many seem open and we have a choice to make
 - And our own willingness, eagerness, and hesitation to even walk when we do see the right one right in front of us
 - Yes, listening and hearing God's calling and purpose and direction in our lives is not a cut and dry task at all
 - Today I want to invite you into a couple of themes I have been praying and considering this week, some mulling of things, if you will
 - Listening, hearing, sitting patiently, being curious
 - It springs from a zoom group I am in with some other Barrington area civil leaders, where we are discussing diversity in the area
 - And we are learning better ways to talk and listen to each other
 - They asked us this week to say, “I know we always say that, but what do you mean by it?” when we hear a familiar cliché
 - It has been interesting to say the least
 - It is perhaps harder for you and me in our post-modern world, to live a life of faith that embodies listening, hearing, discernment
 - Rather than the noise, opinions, and action that seems to be all around us.
 - I am grateful for this recount of Paul's journey to meet Lydia in Macedonia

- For the telling of the well known story of Jesus healing the man by the pools
- For I believe that in each of these weaves some help for everyone who finds themselves trying to hear God's voice in their lives over the noise
- For everyone who finds themselves at crossroads, or unprecedented places in life, or uncertain about their future
 - We are offered some hope. And a path forward.
- As we seek to follow the Spirit at every point in our lives
- Most certainly, if we were to talk about New Testament people who heard the call of Jesus, and responded, we would have to talk about Paul
 - From the beginning of his encounter with Jesus, Paul was spoken to in ways that would be very hard to ignore
 - Paul's conversion started it all, with Jesus appearing to him, speaking to him, and striking him blind until he listened and obeyed
 - God closed all doors but one, it seems to me, but I suppose Paul could have kept persecuting Christians even while blind
 - Paul began traveling and spreading the news of Jesus Christ, met disciples in Jerusalem and advocated for the Gentile believers
 - And now finds himself in a uncertain place
 - For a man who has had such clarity of direction and purpose, he seems to be struggling as to what to do next
 - In the verse just before this, the author said that the Holy Spirit forbade them to speak the Word in Asia
 - Again the spirit did not allow them to go into Bithynia, so they found themselves in Troas unsure and waiting
 - They had crossed Asia Minor without enough success to warrant even a story¹
 - As one writer said, God vetoed the strategic plan Paul had in mind... ²
 - And there they waited.
 - But God had another plan ready- God sent Paul a vision of a man beckoning him to Macedonia
 - This is the center of intellect and political power in the ancient world³

¹ *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Marion Soards, ed., p. 140

² David G. Forney, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Easter 6, Pastoral Perspective, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Digital Resource

³ Walaskay, Acts, 156, quoted by Huey, Kathryn Matthews (2012-11-16). Sermon Seeds Year C (Kindle Location 5346). Pilgrim Press/United Church Press. Kindle Edition.

- Philippi was a colony where veterans of Rome's civil war were given land when the fighting was over⁴
- This colony was a Roman as one could get.
- Scripture says that Paul was convinced, resolutely, of what God wanted him to do next
 - I will tell you, I envy Paul's clarity here on perhaps a weekly basis, don't you?
 - Sometimes the time of unknowing, the wandering without sight, can last a while longer than scripture made it seem here
 - The Israelites wandered for 40 looking for God's promised land!
 - But here, Paul sees this vision and immediately leaves, convinced of God's instruction
 - Visions are tough things, right?
 - I am tempted to think that a vision would solve all of my dilemmas at any point- "God just give me a sign!"
 - However, usually a vision is just the beginning of discernment, rather than the end of it
 - A vision brings with it the responsibility of determining its source: God, or perhaps an unconscious part of our own psyche
 - It requires listening intently afterward
 - I am reminded of what Bishop Chilton said last Saturday to the Confirmands...
 - These vows we make, this life of faith we try to live, is impossible without the help of a church
 - A group of Christians who are also listening for the Holy Spirit's guidance, and helping us test and clarify the path
- Paul had his companion, Timothy, together they discerned and were convinced to go to Philippi
 - And they met Lydia, she was like a Mary and Martha all rolled into one!
 - Her heart set on God while she gets the work done⁵
 - And it is Lydia who gives us the best example of what it means to listen to God's Spirit
 - The Lord opened her heart... We see right away that it is not Paul's magnificent teaching or orator skills that converts Lydia
 - It is God. And her listening heart.

⁴ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter6c>

⁵ Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Easter 6, Theological Perspective, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Digital Resource

- God's guidance and human faithfulness all combined into this moment of clarity⁶
- She was able to, in the midst of running a household and a purple cloth business, to join the group for prayer by the river
- And to embody listening to God into her life
- Lydia is an amazing example of faith for many reasons-
 - The first is that she is a women, and spends a good deal of time talking openly to a strange male traveler ⁷
 - And Scripture records her as wealthy, and as the head of her household
 - And the fact that a wealthy women like Lydia would even stoop to listen to a traveling Missionary was tremendous
 - There was not a lot of overlap between the classes at this time, and certainly little class mobility
- But Lydia hears God's call here and reaches out in all of these faithful ways, navigating through closed and open doors
- Feeling the Spirit's movement, and responds with hospitality⁸, she invites Paul and Timothy to come stay at her house
- And soon after she becomes a leader of a house church that begins here.
- All because she paused and listened to the Holy Spirit through Paul, and bravely followed where it led
- At the beginning of the sermon, I talked a bit about uncertainty, the place before the vision or the certainty
 - A place where if I were to guess many of us find or have found ourselves at one time or another
 - Unsure of the future, or where God is in it
 - The opposite of the certainty Paul and Lydia seemed to have
 - And if we are not careful, we can begin to think that uncertainty is evidence of weak faith
 - Instead I believe that certainty, at least the loud kind, the kind that refuses to listen, can be evidence to the opposite- the lack of faith

⁶ Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Easter 6, Theological Perspective, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Digital Resource

⁷ Interpretation: A Bible Commentary New Testament, Westminster John Knox Press, 1993©, Acts 16:11-40 commentary

⁸ David G. Forney, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Easter 6, Pastoral Perspective, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Digital Resource

- Richard Rohr says that what we need today is less of the “mouthy certitude,” and more of the “mystical certitude.”⁹
- He characterizes the mouthy certitude as “filled with bravado, overstatement, quick, dogmatic conclusions, and a rush to judgment.
 - People like this are always trying to convince others.
 - “They need to get us on their side and tend to talk a lot in the process.
 - But “Underneath the “mouthiness” is a lot of anxiety about being right.
 - and “often gives itself away, frankly, by being rude and even unkind because it’s so convinced it has the whole truth.”
 - Because not having the whole truth creates uncertainty, which is too terrible to consider
- Then he contrasts that with Mystical certitude.
- He says, “Mystical certitude is utterly authoritative, but it’s humble. It isn’t unkind.
 - It doesn’t need to push its agenda. It doesn’t need to compel anyone to join a club, a political party, or even a religion.
 - It’s a calm, collected presence, which Jesus seems to possess entirely”
- It is certainly what Jesus demonstrates as he hears, sees, and heals a blind man that everyone else has forgotten in today’s Gospel
 - And does it on the Sabbath- because love is more important than dogma
- And for Paul and Lydia, their ability to embody mystical certitude, and the power of listening and sitting in the unknown
- That is what made a way for God’s work in their lives that was to come.
- And here is the real point today for me, bringing together the types of certitude with Paul and Lydia, is our own challenge
 - I read the news, hear the pundits, see the yelling, hear untruth shouted with mouthy certitude!
 - And I believe that what our world needs a lot more of is listening, considering, mulling of things
 - We Americans in particular are so in love with our freedom of speech that we have forgotten about our freedom and privilege to hear
 - We have valued “mouthy certitude” so much that we start to believe mystical, quiet, humble faith is inferior

⁹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/mystical-certitude-2022-05-20/>

- We struggle with hearing someone else with a different view or opinion without attempting to convince them of their error
- However, Lydia, and to some extent Paul, show us a different kind of being
- A way of finding certitude in the ongoing unfolding of God's plan until such time as it is clear
- In faith and trust in God, rather than in the knowing of all of the truth
- Humble certainty within the unknowing and mystery
- And whether God is opening a door, closing a door, or adjusting a window
- The foundation we stand on is not certainty in a particular path forward, but a mystical certitude in the fact that God is making one
 - Even if we do not know what it is yet.
- And then when that moment comes, that path forward opens up
- When we are certain, and when through those believers who journey with us we discern God's direction
- We go boldly. With mystical certitude, humility, and maybe a recklessness abandon to follow God's call wherever that may lead us.
- May this week bring you many opportunities to hear, both from God and from someone else
- To embody a posture of hearing and listening through the noise
- Invite God into the mulling, the place of unknowing.
- And perhaps bring us a gift in knowing that God is there even when life is full of mystery and the unknown future.
- And God is there, right in the middle of it, making a new way
- Can we sit with God while God works to open those doors?

Amen.