

**"What Openness Looks Like"**  
**Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
**Lectionary Year C**

**May 9, 2010**

**Texts: Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5**

**Dr. David T. Howeth**

When I first read our text for this morning from Revelation, something jumped out at me. Maybe you had the same experience. John is describing what the holy city, the new Jerusalem, will look like. In John's vision, as the city descends out of heaven, sort of like the giant spacecraft does at the conclusion of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, John notes that he sees no temple in the city. Isn't that interesting? Here is the holy city, the new Jerusalem, a picture of life on earth as it should be, restored completely to a state of perfection, and there is no temple, no designated place of worship, no sanctuary, no church.

How can this be a holy city with no church? Isn't that what makes a city holy, its churches? That's what they say down at the Chamber of Commerce. "This is a great city, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, you'll love living here—low taxes, quiet neighborhoods with little traffic, attractive parks, safe streets, close to the lake, golf courses nearby, good schools, and *lots of churches*." Isn't that what makes any city a great city, a quality city, a holy city?

But John quickly tells us why there is no church, no sanctuary, no designated place for worship, no temple. There's no need for one, just like there is no need for a sun or moon. You see, the sun and moon are

means to an end. They exist to provide light, one by day and the other by night. But in God's perfect world, the radiance of God's own glory is all the light that is needed.

In the same way, *the church is a means to an end and not an end in itself*. The church exists for the sole purpose of worshiping God, to serve as a reminder that God is worthy of praise, adoration, thanksgiving, devotion, and obedience. There is no need for a temple in the holy city, because God is worshiped without it, and *it's more important for God to be worshiped than it is for the church to exist*. The church is only necessary to the extent that it promotes and develops individual and communal faith in the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. Faith in God is the end, and the church is merely the means to that end. What a fascinating concept, one we would do well to keep in mind more often.

As much as a city without a temple interests me, however, another feature of the new Jerusalem, as John sees it, captures my attention even more. I can't help but notice that the city has gates that never close. Did you catch that? The gates to the city stay open. John has a rather clever way of putting it: the gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. So the city gates remain open and not closed all the time, twenty-four hours a day and 365 days a year. Now that's an open door policy.

The new Jerusalem, then, God's holy city, the symbol for the world as God intends it—is characterized by openness. It's open, inclusive, inviting, welcoming. God always leaves the light on, literally. In God's city in the future God will bring about, there are no insiders and outsiders, no members and non-members, no us and them. The holy city

is not a country club with a sign on the gate that reads, "You've got to have membership card to get inside." It's open to all, available to all, and all are welcome there.

Sure, the text says that nothing unclean or accursed will be found in the city, and maybe that's because only good people get in, people who have never, ever been guilty of any kind of abomination or falsehood. Maybe that's why the city is so clean. Or maybe *God has made clean all who are unclean*, has lifted the curse from all who are accursed, and has forgiven and redeemed all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Perhaps that's why the gates can stay open so that anyone may enter, because of the love and the grace of God.

Perhaps that's another reason why there is no need for the church in God's holy city. When the church starts thinking it's a gate—a gate to let some people into God's kingdom and to keep others out, a gate to include some and exclude others from the love and grace of God—*when the church starts thinking it's a gate, it needs to remember that in God's perfect world there is no church and the gate never closes.*

John's vision in Revelation provides us with one picture of openness. It's what openness looks like on a cosmic scale. But there's just one problem with this picture. It's in the future, the future God will bring about, but the future that is not fully realized yet. What about now? What about in our less than perfect world, our unholy city, our old Jerusalem? What does openness look like for us in the meantime?

I think it just may look like the story that the book of Acts shares with us about how Paul came to establish the church in the city of Philippi in Macedonia. If we examine this story carefully, we can get a pretty

good picture of what openness looks like on this side of the end-times. I believe this story helps us to see what openness can look like in our lives, right here and now.

The story begins with a vision. In the vision, Paul sees a man of Macedonia pleading for the Apostle to come to what is now Europe and begin churches there. "Come over to Macedonia and help us," says the man in the vision to Paul. And Paul goes, along with his companions, to do as the vision indicates, to preach in Europe. As the account in Acts makes clear, this little trip to Philippi takes some effort. It is no walk around the block or stroll in the park. It involves traveling by land and sea. It takes preparations; reservations have to be made; passage has to be booked. Paul goes to a considerable amount of trouble to respond to this vision.

And so he gets to Philippi, the leading city of the district of Macedonia and a prominent Roman colony. Now Paul's smart. He knows that you start at the top and work your way down. As was his custom, Paul and his fellow missionaries try to find some Jewish worshipers on the Sabbath. That's where Paul likes to begin his work, with those people who already believed in God and the promise of a messiah. If Paul could convince them that Jesus was indeed the messiah of God, then Paul had instant converts.

But there's a problem. The city of Philippi, as it turns out, doesn't have enough Jews to form a synagogue [*Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 586], the usual place for Sabbath worship. But Paul hears that a group of people gather each Sabbath outside the city gates for worship. That's a curious little connection between the text from Acts and the

text from Revelation, isn't it? We have city gates in both. Where is the worship of God going on in Philippi? Outside the open city gates. Not where you would expect it. And when Paul finds the place of worship down by the riverside, he's in for another surprise.

For you see, the Apostle finds there a Sabbath gathering composed exclusively of women [*The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 308]. No men, only women. What a shock this must have been to Paul. In Philippi, the leading city in southern Europe, there not only is no synagogue, but the only people worshipping the God of the Old Testament are a few women who get together once a week by the creek out in the boondocks.

Luke, the writer of Acts, doesn't tell us what goes through Paul's mind when he encounters the women at Philippi, but considering the times in which this story was written, I don't think it takes too much imagination to picture the kind of conversation Paul might have been having with God right about then. I believe it may have gone something like this:

"You've got to be kidding, God. You woke me up from a good night's sleep down in Troas for this. You had me do all that traveling for this. No synagogue, I could live with that. No place to meet inside the city limits, I could deal with that. But only women. No way! What in the world can I do here in Philippi with just a small group of women? Look, God, I think you tricked me. In my vision it was *a man* of Macedonia, not a woman. I never would've come to Philippi if I had known that this was all there was to work with here. Come on, God, I deserve better. This is not at all what I expected. I'm not happy about this, not one little bit."

Maybe Paul didn't say anything like this to God. We don't know one way or the other. But what we do know is that Paul goes ahead, reluctantly or not, and shares the good news of Jesus Christ with the women gathered at the river outside of Philippi. Among those women is Lydia, and when Paul and his companions speak, the Lord opens her heart.

She becomes the first Christian convert in Europe. What's more, she is just exactly the kind of convert that will do Paul the most good in a city like Philippi.

You see, Lydia is a wealthy widow, a prominent businesswoman who sells purple cloth, a luxury item for the upper class. Her business puts her in contact with the elite of the city, the movers and shakers of Philippi, the people of influence in the town. Lydia offers her home as a center for Paul and the other missionaries, so that the first church in Europe has an attractive and inviting place to meet. She introduces Paul to her friends and business colleagues, allowing the Apostle to make contacts and begin networking in the community. Lydia goes on to become the primary benefactor of the church, its mother so to speak, and to provide the much needed financial resources to begin spreading the gospel in that region of the world. No *man* of Macedonia could have done more for the church.

*This is what openness looks like.* Paul was open to God's vision to go to Macedonia in the first place, even if he may have had concerns when he got there. In spite of what may have been his prejudices, preconceived notions, and foregone conclusions, Paul was open enough to the women in Philippi to introduce them to Christ. He didn't let his disappointment and his dashed expectations stand in the way of his

calling to be a missionary. Lydia was certainly open to God, as she sat and listened to this itinerant preacher talk about the death and resurrection of Jesus as God's messiah. And Paul openly accepted her invitation to host a newly organized Christian church in her home and her offer to be the church's first chair of the finance committee. Because of such openness, to God and to other people, the early church was able to cross yet another crucial frontier.

Let me conclude simply by asking you some questions. Are you practicing this kind of openness in your life? Are you open to God, as open as Paul and Lydia? Would you be as willing as Paul was to respond as quickly as he did to something God might be calling you to do? Are you as open to God's word as Lydia was, open enough to offer your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service to the church to the extent she was? Do you have an open mind and an open heart, open enough for God to do in and through you and this church what he wills?

Are you open to other people, even those people who don't meet your expectations or who are radically different from you and who you don't think you possibly could deal with or work with or relate to? Who are the people you think need to remain outside the gate, maybe down by river, but certainly not in the city? Who are the people on whom you think God has closed the gates to the holy city and who aren't to be included in the scope of God's love and grace? Who are the people you would just as soon close the gates on in some way in your life so that you don't wind up having much to do with them?

Could God be calling you, like he did Paul, to be more open and less closed toward certain groups of people? Could God be calling you to go

outside the city gates, down by the river, and share Christlike love and grace with the people you find there, no matter who they are? Could God be calling this church to have gates that never close, by day or by night, so that anyone and everyone is welcome here? If so, what would such openness look like in your life and in ours together as a congregation?