

WPC
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Communion

An Open Door to a New Decade
Rev. 3:7-13; 14-22

The book of Revelation, which is the last book in the Bible, begins with John sending seven letters to seven churches. Today, we've read the letter to the church in Philadelphia, a little city that served as a Roman outpost. Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities, and the church in Philadelphia was poor and small, but stayed faithful even in the midst of intense pressure from the citizens and the local synagogue.

In v.8, they are told, "I have set before you an open door." What is this door that's been opened wide, that "no one is able to shut"? In early Christian understanding, a "door" was a technical expression for an opportunity to spread the gospel. This church, though small, had a great missionary task to perform. However, they had been met with opposition from the Jewish population of the city, who rejected the claim of Christians that Jesus was the Messiah. A reward is promised to this little church. Because it had faithfully kept Christ's word of patient endurance, he promises to be with them in the midst of testing and suffering.

This wonderful letter offers us today a strategy to live out our faith. First, it's God who opens (and closes) doors, not us. That should help us to relax when we share the good news of the gospel. It's God's responsibility to open doors, not mine. It's not my responsibility to convict and convert people. God is the evangelist, not us. He opens doors, not us. We're simply witnesses to the marvelous ways God has been at work in our lives.

Second, God knows about our weaknesses - "I know that you have but little power," he says to the Philadelphians. But God promises to use this Philadelphia church even though they're fiscally and numerically challenged. God will use these Philadelphia Christians to share their faith with those who don't know God, to share with them the good news that God loves them.

It's God who opens doors - he does the convincing, the convicting, and the converting; all we have to do is share the fact that we've been loved. Because we've experienced the love of God at work in our lives, we can just relax and share the good news. But we can't share what we don't have. W. Frank Harrington, former pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church, the largest Presbyterian Church in America, once said, "Our mission is clear. There is no lack of clarity in what our Lord has asked us, the members of the church, to do. We are to tell the story of Jesus Christ to those who do not

believe or who have not heard. But we cannot share with others something that we do not have. We have to believe before we can teach. This may be the central challenge for the church in the United States today.”

Ten years ago, in January of 2000, I stood in this pulpit and preached on this same text. Deb and I had been called as Co-Pastors just a short time earlier, and we were beginning a new decade together. I remember thinking at the time how similar WPC was to the Philadelphia church.

Like the church at Philadelphia, our congregation was on the small side. At Session meetings, we often talked about how we could use more members. Our Finance Committee regularly reminded us of the tightness of our budget. But Deb and I remained firmly convinced that Wallingford Presbyterian Church stood at that turn-of-the-decade on the brink of incredible opportunities, that God would continue to use our ordinary lives to do extraordinary things. That’s why we came here in the first place. We believed that our future as a church was bright because of the light of Christ that burns so warmly here. Like the church at Philadelphia, we were a faithful, vibrant, Spirit-filled church able to do extraordinary things with God’s help.

I still believe this to be true as we start another decade together. Just for fun, I glanced through our annual reports and forms from this past

decade to see how God has worked in and through this church. Here are just a few highlights of the past ten years:

- Amazing building improvements: new front doors, new bathrooms, downstairs rooms and kitchen remodeled, new roof, brickwork repairs, and a new elevator.
- Two Korean congregations who have shared our church building.
- Merger with the Ravenna Blvd. PC.
- Establishing our youth groups, starting our 3rd confirmation class this year, sending our youth to Triennium and mission trips.
- Plenty of mission , from the Alternative Gift Fair to our Peacemaking Offering (among the highest per capita in the presbytery) to food drives with Solid Ground to the CROP Walk.
- Walking alongside Emily McGinley as she prepared for ministry at McCormick Theological Seminary.
- The work of the Long Range Planning and Appreciative Inquiry teams.
- The Lilly Foundation grant that allowed your pastors to take a four month sabbatical.
- Welcoming 40 new members to our church family, as well as a number of other people who have become regularly involved. This is in addition to the 30 or so people from the Ravenna merger, and it doesn't include our staff (Jim & Emily Watkins, Ray Allen, Gina Topp, Ester Sihite, Gayle Lundquist, & David

Lang). Ken Duff used to say that WPC had one of the greatest alumni networks ever – we are a church that sends out our people into the world.

Of course, along with these and other highlights, we've also experienced our share of challenges. A number of our elderly members have passed away, leaving a sizeable void. Many of our members have moved out of the area. Others have drifted away. This fact is tougher for a congregation our size to face – we would be well over 100 members if everyone who joined this last decade was still with us. And you no longer have Co-Pastors: Deb has moved on to be the pastor of Magnolia PC.

But the good news is that when we look back, we can see that God has opened doors for us in the past decade, and he will continue to do so as we begin this new decade. We've seen that we can make a difference in our neighborhood, our city, our world that's surprisingly disproportionate to our current size.

Let me share with you one hope I have for us as a congregation: I hope and pray that we can all go deeper in our faith. One way to achieve this goal is for all of us to get involved with a small group this year. This Lent, you will be invited to participate in a 4-week small group session called "March to Holy Week."

Small groups will be meeting at various times during the week (morning, noon, and evenings) in the month of March to study selected sections of Richard Foster's book Celebration of Discipline. Study guides will be made available so that each small group will be studying the same material each week. "March to Holy Week" will culminate with everyone gathering at WPC for worship on Good Friday, April 2, in preparation for celebrating Easter three days later.

Why is it so vitally important to deepen our faith? Well, after the message to the church in Philadelphia, the very next message is to the church in Laodicea. Let me read it for you: [Read Rev. 3:14-22]

The church in Laodicea is condemned because they are neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. We're called not to be lukewarm, not to stagnate in our faith. In fact, the term "Lukewarm Christian" is really an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp, or a working vacation, or even, on some days, Congressional leadership. We either follow Christ or we don't.

How are we living our Christian lives? Are we merely spectators in the stands? Are we involved only on the sidelines? Or are we in the game? Jesus calls us to not be lukewarm but to get in the game.

As we gather together at the communion table this morning as the family of God, let's give thanks that God will continue to open doors for

each one of us and for us as a congregation, and let's pray that we'll be ready for those wonderful opportunities. Amen.