

SERMON TITLE: "Opening the Way: Open Doors of Faith"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 14:21-28
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 22, 2018, at First UMC—Tenth Anniversary in Marriott-Slaterville

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 10 days or so, I had two opportunities to enjoy Ogden's "Restaurant Week." During this annual event, local downtown restaurants promote themselves by offering a special menu at lower prices, in order to attract more customers and bring new people through their doors.

This Ogden restaurant promotion reminded me of a Chamber of Commerce campaign that happened in Pueblo, Colorado, where I used to live. There, the local business owners in the historic district got together and created a colorful poster that showed only the doors of their restaurants and stores. Some of the doors were brown; others were black, green, blue, or red. Some doors had fancy knobs and hardware. Other doors were unique because of the type or shape of their windows. Like a puzzle, the poster challenged its viewers to identify the businesses to which the doors belonged.

I liked that poster so much that I bought one and hung it on the door of my church office. It reminded me that the *church* also has doors—doors through which we invite and welcome people to ministry and provide an opening to faith in Jesus Christ.

Open doors of faith is what I want to talk about this morning. All this month, we've been hearing about ways that God has opened up opportunities for faith development. God began opening the way with the grand opening of the tomb on Easter morning, so the women could see that Jesus' body was no longer there. Next we learned about how the risen Christ opened the hearts of the disciples who walked home to Emmaus. Then we read about Jesus' appearance to the disciples in Jerusalem, and how Jesus used their physical senses and an explanation of the scriptures to open their minds to understanding.

All three of those stories took place on or near Easter Day. Today's scripture from Acts 14 happens much later, maybe 20 years after Jesus' resurrection, during the first missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. As we consider these verses, let's see what the ministry of Paul and Barnabas can tell us about how we might open doors of faith.

1—PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS

The first clue we see in this scripture passage is found in Acts 14:21. There we see that we open doors of faith when we proclaim the good news. As Paul and Barnabas traveled around the Mediterranean region, they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Acts 14 doesn't spell out the details of this good news message, but we see some clear content in Acts 13. In a sermon there, Paul explained that Jesus was condemned, killed, and laid in a tomb. That was the bad news backstory. But God did not allow Jesus to waste away. Instead, God raised Jesus from the dead. And, after that, the resurrected Jesus appeared to many witnesses. Paul indicated that these actions fulfilled the words of the Jewish prophets and the psalms. Paul also proclaimed to his audience that, where the Law of Moses had been powerless to forgive sins, it was now possible to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Jesus. This proclamation of the good news opened doors of faith for many people, who believed and became Christian disciples.

Today, here at our church, we too are called to proclaim this good news of Jesus' resurrection. When we're overcome by the hardships of life and the guilt of sin, we can rejoice in the victory of God over all kinds of physical suffering and spiritual pain. Who doesn't need a message like that? Through worship services and Sunday school lessons, through sermons and songs, through Christian fellowship at church, through mission projects in the world, and through our positive witness to our neighbors, we proclaim that injustice and death aren't the end of the story. In God's kingdom, something better is possible now and in the life to come. We members of First United Methodist Church open doors of faith when we proclaim that good news.

2—STRENGTHEN AND ENCOURAGE THE DISCIPLES

A second way that we can open doors of faith is to strengthen and encourage the disciples. We see this in Acts 14:22. Paul and Barnabas were traveling missionaries. They usually didn't stay long in one place. Most often, they preached a message and moved on, sometimes circling back to check up on their new converts to see how they were doing. Paul and Barnabas had previously been in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, and now they had just returned.

I'm sure this action of strengthening and encouraging the disciples included additional proclamation of the good news of forgiveness and resurrection life through Jesus. But verse 22 indicates that the nurturing of the new disciples also included a reality check about the many persecutions that would come before the kingdom of God would be fully realized. Missionaries Paul and Barnabas had to manage some expectations, so that the new disciples would persevere and not give up. The gospel is good news, but, until we fully enter the kingdom of God, we'll also continue to experience some hardships.

This talk about persecution and conflicts wasn't abstract or hypothetical, and it wasn't only felt by the new converts to Christianity. Paul and Barnabas had a lot of personal experience with controversy and resistance. In Acts 14:19, when the missionaries were in the city of Lystra, they encountered some fierce opposition, and Paul was stoned to the point that his persecutors thought he was dead. Fortunately, Paul was able to rise up and carry on with his ministry. It's amazing that the proclamation of the good news of forgiveness and eternal life can generate such animosity, but, strangely, it sometimes does.

And, so, strengthening and encouraging the disciples is all the more important for opening doors of faith. And that's why Acts 14:23 tells us that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church. These Christians who faced controversy, conflict, and hardship needed resident spiritual leaders to help guide them when the missionaries moved on. And that's why the appointment of spiritual leaders was

done with prayer and fasting and trusting in the Lord. Whether you're a bishop, a district superintendent, or a local church Staff Parish Relations or Nominating Committee, it's important to recruit and place resilient leaders who can understand and withstand the troubles that might come in a community of believers. That wisdom and calm in the face of storm doesn't happen by accident; it comes through the intentional and sometimes sacrificial practice of spiritual disciplines. As for prayer and *fasting*, I know we'd rather pray and *eat potluck dinners*. I guess there's a time and a place for both of those. The idea here is that we open the doors of faith when we strengthen and encourage the disciples.

3—KEEP REACHING OUT TO NEW PEOPLE

In addition to proclaiming good news and strengthening and encouraging the disciples, this text offers a third suggestion of how we can open doors of faith. We can keep reaching out to new people. When Peggy read this scripture for us, you might have noticed that she had to navigate the difficult pronunciation of a number of cities. In just the one chapter of Acts 14, there are the names of nine different places: Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Lycaonia and surrounding country, Antioch, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, and Attalia. And verse 27 tells us that, when the Jewish people rejected the message of Paul and Barnabas, God opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. In those early decades of Christianity, there was always a new group of people who hadn't yet heard the message.

Today, we often decry the decline of the church. Everywhere across America, less and less people attend worship and Sunday school. Consequently, less and less people know very much about the Christian faith or the Bible. While that's sad, one positive thing can be said about it. We have a new, wide-open mission field all around us. Unlike the 1960s, when churches were full and there was hardly anyone who wasn't attached to a church in one way or another, now there are all kinds of people around us who don't attend worship or Bible classes. Obviously, here in Utah, the majority of people

are connected to the LDS faith. But, even here, probably on every block of houses, there is someone or maybe several who don't participate in a faith community.

When our congregation moved out here to Marriott-Slaterville, there was the expectation and hope that this NW suburban area would fill in with lots of houses and many people would come to our church. That hasn't happened as well as we would have liked. But the potential is still here, as the population is expected to climb over the next decades. And, just like so many of you drive long distances to worship here, other people might do the same. We just have to keep our invitations moving. We have to keep trying to find new people to ask. Is there a house for rent or for sale nearby you? Keep an eye out for an opportunity to invite your new neighbors. Is someone new coming to work at your business? Is someone new coming to your school? Be sure to let them know who you are and that they would be welcome in our church.

Just as our congregation moved from the train depot to three different downtown church buildings and then finally out here to Marriott-Slaterville, we need to keep opening new doors to new people. We need to think of every activity we do as a door through which someone could become interested and involved in our church. Beekeeping. Veterans Tribute Run & Chili Cook-off. Bell Choir. Chancel Choir. Adult Friday Class. United Methodist Men. United Methodist Women. United Methodist Youth. Dinners and programs. Craft Bazaar. Mission Projects. Rummage Sale. Vacation Bible School. Isn't our congregation always busy doing something interesting, fun, and beneficial to the community and the world? Yes, we are. So let's take the fullest advantage of that. Let's be sure to invite people to walk through our open doors to these activities and, beyond, to faith in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have so much to celebrate today, on this Tenth Anniversary of the first worship service in this new church building. So let's proclaim the good news. Let's strengthen and encourage the disciples. Let's keep reaching out to new people. Let's do everything we can to open doors of faith.