

## “With Open Doors”

Rev. David Gregory

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### **Scripture reading**

Matthew 5:13-16

*from The Message by Eugene Peterson*

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

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The life of the preacher has an uncertain rhythm. Let me tell you why. When it comes to preparation for Sundays, I have begun to settle into my CCC routine. On Monday I try to finalize the readings for the following Sunday. By Tuesday I'm composing the plans for each of the two services. Wednesday finds me with a basic outline of what I want to say, and by Thursday—if I'm organized—I add flesh to the bones of the message, hopefully completing it before my Friday Sabbath. At least that's the plan.

But there are those weeks when events overtake me, and rather than following “the plan,” the plan gets up-ended. When I was younger, I found this to be frustrating. These days I find it Spirit-driven and therefore life-giving. For one thing, Stone Soup on Thursdays is often a game-changer. Then there was this delicious silent retreat here yesterday that altered my course in many ways. Then there were news reports last night of what may have been the largest citizen demonstration in the history of our nation's capital, joined by others across this nation, including ones in San Francisco and Santa Rosa. Oh, and did I mention it is Palm Sunday? There is enough material here for four sermons, and as my writing coach in Woodstock likes to say, the most important work the writer does is found in choosing what *not* to say.

My guiding principle today, then, is to give attention to Holy Spirit, and just what it is She happens to be shouting. It's an interesting concept, right? "Yes, God," the preacher says, "I understand what you're saying, but I've got a sermon plan, so take a number and I'll get to you shortly." How ridiculous is that? So, fasten your seat belts. The ride may not be bumpy, but it's going to move fast.

If there were ever a model for a public demonstration, it is the story of a peasant rabbi named Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, with poor, hungry, desperate people unable to recreate the pageantry of Herod, so they take palm branches which they wave for effect, and throw their cloaks in the path beneath him while they shout "Hosanna," which simply means "Save us now!" or "Do something to help us, and be quick about it." They might just as well have said, "We've had enough!" Soon, in an angry tirade, their teacher is in the courts of the temple wreaking havoc with the extortioners seated at the money tables, who hold the people hostage to their own religion. They represent the final straw in a culture based upon the exploitation of society's most vulnerable people, and to be silent about it would violate everything Jesus had been teaching for the prior three years. At risk of his life and the lives of his followers, he said, in effect, "Enough!" And today, an entirely new generation in America and across the world is saying the same thing. If you cannot speak truth to power, then we will. Six weeks ago, we reached a tipping point. Spirit is shouting, and we in this room can either pay attention or settle for being irrelevant.

For four weeks now, we have been practicing our openness. We hold this spiritual community, the life and work of this church, with open hands. We surrender our private agendas because — let's face it — we don't own the place. We approach each other with open hearts: vulnerable, risky, sometimes uncomfortable, but always authentic. To love is to be vulnerable, and without love, we are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal; we make a big show, but without lasting effect. We open our minds to coexist with those on paths other than our own, maintaining our convictions and respecting the opinions and experiences of others with whom we may vehemently disagree. It is the only way forward. Today we open our doors.

We used to think having open doors was about being Open and Affirming: "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." So we hang out a sign, we open our doors, and we wait for them to come pouring through, because that's what happened here fifty years ago. We built it and they came. If there's one thing we know for sure, that model for ministry went out with the Ford Pinto.

Within the last year, and right up to this moment, we have been seeking and crafting a vision for the future of this place. In the process has been much soul-searching, looking at the place with fresh sets of eyes. There are new understandings based upon generational differences, highlighted by the insightful work of John Mabry. Most of you didn't know me then, but I was reading his work right along with you, sitting on my sofa in Scarsdale yelling, "YES!" Of course! That's right!" I've spent my entire life as a self-obsessed Baby Boomer, but John Mabry helped me understand my late parents, who I think represented the Silent Generation, my niece and one of my nephews who are GenXers, and my sons and my daughter-in-law who are Millennials, sometimes known as GenY. But in the last six weeks it is Generation Z that has my

full attention, and the attention of the world. These are high school kids turned articulate activists who are the new revolutionaries. They outnumber the Baby Boomers. They even outnumber Millennials. They are speaking, and we should listen. So what, in that context, do “open doors” mean to us today?

History is more complex than this, but five hundred years ago there was a major upheaval in Western civilization, and it was called the Protestant Reformation. It was born in the Enlightenment and fueled by a brand new technology called the printing press. For the first time, the Bible got into the hands of people so they could read it for themselves. People began publishing their own ideas and opinions about everything. It connected the world in a way that it had never been connected before. But it did not happen without serious difficulty and societal upheaval. In some cases, it led to war. But nothing could stop it.

I believe we are in a New Reformation. People are calling it by many names, but it was born in the waning days of the 20th century, and it is fueled by a brand-new technology. For the first time, people are sharing their ideas instantaneously with the entire world. This new world is the only one that Generation Z has ever known. Now, this New Reformation is not happening without serious difficulty and societal upheaval. But nothing can stop it. And it is downright silly to try.

We say our doors are open, but they cannot remain so if we are going to sit here on the top of the hill and wait for generations X, Y, or Z to come through them. That would mean our only conversation is about legacy, and how in some meaningful way, we can put it all to rest. I want to say unequivocally while things are still fresh and new with us, I didn't come here to put anything to rest. OK? I came here because of a door of opportunity, one that we can go through together.

In fact, there are many doors for us to pass through. There are doors of activism, for example. We are a collection of individual activists, but there is room for us to become an activist congregation, to say to the world that as a community of people we care enough to act. There are doors of contemplation, where we become more deeply grounded and rooted in Spirit, so that we have energy coming from unseen places to stand in the world and act the way Jesus seems to have stood and acted. But there is another door that is vital to our place and work in this world, and it's right here in this iPhone.

We don't like it. We'd rather put an ad in the newspaper, or pass out flyers at a parade. To interact virtually, electronically with the world feels very risky. Mr. Zuckerberg has not proven himself particularly worthy of our trust, but some people didn't like Mr. Gutenberg either. These are simply the doors that are open to us, taking us to places where we will engage those who will come after us. More importantly, these are the places where they will engage us, and as the New Reformation begins to take shape, they will be our teachers and guides.

We are not here to entrust the work that we have done to be carried on by people born in this new century. We are here to learn from them what a new world can be like. They've run out of patience with us, and rightly so.

Amen.