



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

March 2, 2014

"Close Doors, Open Doors" - Acts 16:1-24

Ron Mathieu

These are submarine overalls. Submariners call them a "poo-pie suit", and I used to wear them when I served on submarines.



Yes, I know it's hard to believe, but I was once a submariner, a trained killer of the deep, a member of the Silent Service, a Cold War warrior. And so were a number a people sitting next to you in church this morning, like Bill Hicks and Tom Kyle.

This is me doing a periscope sweep—the grey hair didn't come until I started working at First Prez!

I bet you're thinking how did a submariner become the Executive Director of our church! I mean, it's not a common career path is it?

A better question would be: "How did a guy who was studying to be a veterinarian, then a seminarian preparing to be a

Catholic priest, then a college English professor...become a submariner?"

Some may be thinking, "What's the mystery? Ron just couldn't hold a job!"

But the truth is I've sensed God calling me in a number of directions in my life, and prayed very hard for doors to open, only to see them slammed shut in ways that seemed (at the time) to be disappointing game changers.

Why does God block paths that we feel called to pursue? Why does He bar doors we diligently prayed He would open?

And what *can* we or what *should* we do when that happens?

Today we're continuing in the Book of Acts, chapter 16, and I believe it can give us helpful insight into God's way.

Whenever I'm asked a question I don't know the answer to, I'm reminded of when I was a pre-veterinary student at the University of Rhode Island. I heard about a very easy and very popular Bible survey course that all the football players used to take.

They did this because the

final exam was always the same, guaranteeing a passing grade even if you cut most of the classes. The final exam asked you to trace the travels of the apostle Paul.

After 20 years asking the same question, the prof unexpectedly changed it to "Discuss the Sermon on the Mount." Not surprisingly, everyone flunked the exam except a big linebacker named Arnold, who got a "C."

Everyone was curious as to how he did it. He said when he saw the statement, "Discuss the sermon on the Mount", he wrote: "Who am I to question the words of our Lord? But I would like to review the travels of the apostle Paul!"

So who am I to know why bad things happen to good people? But I would like to discuss the travels of the apostle Paul.

Prior to this chapter in Acts everything seemed to be going pretty well. Okay, Paul was stoned a couple of times (with rocks), but generally amazing things happened: people were converting in droves, such that when Paul and his followers returned to Antioch in Chapter 14:27.

They called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. ²¹ They were commended to the grace of God for all the work they had completed. (14:26)

As Pastor Drew related two weeks ago, on this first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas travelled throughout Asia, founding churches and setting people on fire for the gospel. He didn't actually set them on fire, but you know what I mean.

Go get 'em Paul! The scales have fallen off your eyes, you're stoked about your call, the Gentile world is a target-rich environment that no one else is evangelizing, you have your posse, cripples are walking, other signs and wonders occur, new churches are forming and it's reported that joy is abounding!

It all started so well, but in Chapter 15 they'd come back to a less than enthusiastic welcome from the Jerusalem church, who wanted to know why Paul and his team were baptizing Gentiles.

Then Paul had a falling out with Barnabas and John Mark, so he set off on his next journey with Silas instead of his two trusted ministry partners.

Let's pick up the narrative in Ch 16:

"Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium.

³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." ⁴

And then, skipping to verse 6: ⁶ "Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia."

It says they "were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching." Was that a door we just heard slam?



Now I know most of us are not that familiar with ancient Asian geography. Basically, Paul and crew start on their second missionary trip and try to move back into Asia. But the Holy Spirit keeps them from preaching the Word! So they journey on...

⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia they tried to enter Bithynia [that's in the direction of Russia], but once again the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

Slam and slam again.

This just doesn't sound like the Apostle Paul to me. Paul was an overachiever. He wasn't easily dissuaded. Many scholars believe he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of 71 Jewish sages who constituted the supreme court and legislative body in Judea during the Roman

period. He was walking in pretty tall corn.

There's no doubt he commanded Jewish authority, and was one of the main persecutor of Christians. The Bible records that he was there when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death.

But on the road to Damascus, Paul was personally and miraculously singled out by Jesus, and his conversion and follow-on apostleship of what was called "The Way" was as unexpected as anything that could have been imagined.

Paul's the one who sharply debated with the Council at Jerusalem that Jesus died for Gentiles as well as Jews, and that Gentiles could be saved without being circumcised. Paul is not a wimp, he's used to getting his way, and he's not guy who's easily rebuffed.

But in verse 6 the Holy Spirit keeps him from preaching and in verse 7 Paul feels the Spirit of Jesus blocks his path, and that's raises the first and main point I want to make this morning:

GOD LEADS BY CLOSING DOORS AS WELL AS BY OPENING THEM

That has certainly been true in my life, which is how I ended up wearing a poopie suit!

I started college expecting to be a vet—that's veterinarian, not someone in the military—but then had a strong call to become a Catholic priest. So I sold all my possessions (except my guitar) and entered seminary. Brilliant! Nobody EVER expected that!

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 14:27–28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Seminary was a life-changing experience for a 19-year-old. I was totally immersed in scripture and theology 24/7, prayer and fasting, meditation and worship, and long deep conversations about life and God.

It was also the height of the folk music era, and I was part of the seminary folk troupe that travelled extensively leading worship and performing in folk concerts. One gig was at the Newport Folk Festival appearing on the same stage as Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Peter Paul and Mary.

Then I met Angela, and the door to a vocation as a celibate quasi-hippy animal-loving priest, slammed shut as my life definitely took another unexpected turn. My spiritual advisor in seminary was one of the leading world authorities in comparative literature and his mentorship inevitably exposed me to the best books ever written.

Now married, I became an English major intent on teaching at the college level. After getting my Masters in 19th century American Literature I was invited by my alma mater to teach college literature courses. This was my dream career and I was hired without even applying!

And just when everything seemed perfect another door shut! The Vietnam War ended, students (many of whom who were in college to avoid the draft) dropped out of liberal arts colleges in droves. Without tenure, I found myself unemployed with a wife and young child to support. How could that happen to someone so dedicated to following Jesus?

Although I worked in an

animal hospital, mowed state highways, was a janitor and a gardener...for three years I was turned down for more than 200 teaching vacancies at colleges and universities around the world.

God seemed to block me from what I had aspired and exhaustively trained for years to become.

And I know this is happening to many people who have either been laid off or not able to find employment in the field to which they feel called.

Similarly, it must have been so discouraging for Paul to see "signs and wonders" replaced by signs of "Do Not Enter" as he roamed Asia Minor.

Acts 16 continues: ⁸ *So they passed by Mysia [a region that includes some of Turkey] and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."*

There's a couple of things that strike me here.

First, Paul must have been really frustrated.

In the Book of Acts we travel from Lystra to Troas in two verses, but it's actually 772 miles over land! Even in a car that's a long way. At 15 miles a day, that's 55 days, and it wasn't a walk in the park! This was a group of guys. They had to eat, find places to stay, try (unsuccessfully) to gather people to hear them.

Something tells me it wasn't "Kumbayah" around the campfire every night...which brings me to a second point.

WHEN DOORS SHUT, WATCH AND LISTEN FOR GOD'S LEADING IN OTHER DIRECTIONS

Paul was undoubtedly frustrated; he must have felt very low. He was led across Asia from the extreme south-east to the extreme north-west corner, yet was prevented from preaching in it. Even so, he was as open to the promptings of the Spirit as he was aware of the prohibitions of the Spirit.

Door number one and door number two were disappointing. He was willing to continue on to door number three and four and four hundred. His faith in the vision was stronger than his fear of failure.

I can't help but think of our church's faith journey, the one we call "The Miracle of Ko'olau." For two years our search for a potential site kept running into brick walls. Then one morning I got a call from elder Don Parker who told me he had a dream that night.

"Okay", I said, probably because I didn't want to say, "Whatever. Everybody has dreams" out loud.

"Ron, I never have dreams... at least none that I remember when I wake up. But last night I dreamt I saw Pastor Dan preaching at the Ko'olau Golf course. How weird is that?"



And I realized that God sometimes talks to us in dreams and visions.

We came over here that very day, immediately saw the potential, and despite many, many closed doors in obtaining Ko'olau, through God's grace we're worshipping here this morning! A church buying a golf course? I bet they weren't expecting that!

Back to verse 10: ¹⁰ *After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

Which brings us to another guiding principle Paul used on his journeys and we should in our faith journeys:

KEEP MOVING!

Sometimes, instead of indicating where to go, God just repeatedly blocks us. But if we keep moving, we inevitably head in a better direction. So often when we face disappointment or defeat we find it hard to move on. We're frozen by fear of being hurt again or being unfulfilled. This can be as true of relationships as it can be of career aspirations.

It's natural to grieve when you lose a parent, or spouse, or one of your children. It's understandable after a divorce to be cautious of entering another close relationship. It's devastating when you lose your job or go bankrupt, or receive a bad medical test result.

In life, in relationships, in your career, such roadblocks can cause us to stall or procrastinate or play the "If only" or "I'm waiting for something to happen" game.

"Someday I'll get my dream job." "Someday I'll get married." "Someday I'll be retired and have more time for my family." "Someday I'll seriously think about my relationship with God or what happens after I die."

This happened to me. Like many unemployed and underemployed people who feel victimized by the recent recession, when I couldn't land a college teaching position I lost hope and wanted to give up, concluding I was a failure. I couldn't support my family. I stalled. And I turned away from God because I was sure He had abandoned me.

There was a wise Indian vet at the Animal Hospital I managed named Mahinda Paul (maybe he was my Apostle Paul!) Dr. Paul convinced me to move on in any direction other than inaction, and it resulted in an aspiring veterinarian-priest-English professor becoming a Supply Officer and poopie-suited submariner in the Navy. I bet they weren't expecting that!

Back to our passage: Unlike me, Paul didn't stall! Undeterred by failure, Paul continues to be open to God. He kept moving.

¹¹ *From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace and the next day we went on to Neapolis.* ¹² *From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.*

Macedonia contains a lot of modern day Greece. It was Europe rather than Asia. Not where Paul *intended* to go, not

where Paul *wanted* to go, but when all the other doors shut... because he kept moving, it's where Paul went.

And the Bible says he went right away. They "got ready at once" and "sailed straight" because concluding that "God had called them" and being a no-nonsense man of action, having already been given thousands of people to preach to and having seen remarkable results of growth...by God, Macedonia must be where the low-hanging fruit was in Europe. Right? Wrong!

Paul gets to Phillipi, the leading city in the region, and there aren't even enough Jewish men to form a synagogue at which he can speak!

Judaism was an allowed religion in the Roman Empire, and Christianity was viewed by the Romans as an acceptable variation. This is one of the reasons Paul would start at synagogues. It was legitimate for him to preach at one, but it took at least ten Jewish men to form a synagogue, and Phillipi didn't even have that.

So Paul finds himself on the Sabbath with no place to go to and no one to address. No open synagogue door. No door at all! So he goes down to the river and finds "only" women who were believers of God.

Verse 13 continues: ¹³ *On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.*

Which highlights another guiding principle for the faith journey.

A SMALL DOOR MAY LEAD TO A VAST OPPORTUNITY

¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

This is a huge turning point not only in chapter 16, but in the development of Christianity in the Western world. After all the closed doors Paul encountered on his second missionary journey, the door that opens is the heart of a Gentile woman!

Henry Blackaby wrote: "When you begin to follow God and circumstances seem to close doors of opportunity, go back to the Lord and clarify what God said. He most often is not calling you to a TASK, but to a RELATIONSHIP." (Experiencing God, p. 159)

All of scripture, especially the story of God sending Jesus to live among us and to die for us, is a story about relationship. God wants us to be in relationship with Him. Through Adam, and in our sinful nature, that relationship, that covenant, is broken. The Good News is that through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus, God restores that relationship, in the form of a new covenant.

Paul doesn't encounter a synagogue of men or large crowds, but God places a woman in his path, opens the door of her heart, and underscores another principle worth noting:

OUR DISAPPOINTMENTS ARE OFTEN GOD'S APPOINTMENTS IN DISGUISE

Lydia accepts Paul's teaching, is baptized, and ultimately becomes crucial in the establishment of the early church in Europe.

¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

We later learn in the letters of Paul that almost all of the other new Christian churches have squabbles and even question or rebel against Paul's teachings. Some follow flashy preachers who stray from the message. The Corinthian church even had to be corrected for getting drunk at the Lord's Supper!

But Paul, seemingly on a dead-end mission trip, is led past closed doors to a small group of women by a river. Starting with the persuasive Lydia, the Phillipians become a constant source of financial support and spiritual comfort to Paul. Pastor Dan preached earlier about the generosity of the Macedonians. That church started right here, with a group of women by the river. And Paul's letter to the Phillipians is one of the warmest of the epistles.

We don't have time this morning to look at the rest of Chapter 16 in detail. Paul later encounters a fortune-telling slave girl, casts out her demons, and appears before magistrates for interfering with her owners' making money from her predictions.

The next door we hear slamming is a jail door (again!), and Pastor Dan will pick it up from there next week. But let's not

overlook what happened despite the doors that slammed in Paul's face up to this point. I mentioned earlier that the apostle Paul, prior to his salvation, was a Pharisee.

According to one source I read, it was customary every day when a Pharisee woke up to pray for three things: 1) he thanked God he was not a woman; 2) he thanked God he wasn't a slave; 3) and he thanked God he wasn't a Gentile. Isn't it like God that Paul's first converts in Europe would be a woman, Lydia, a slave girl, and a Gentile! Brilliant! Who would have imagined that!

And not in a million years could I have imagined in my life that closed doors in the paths of veterinary science, seminary training, teaching, military leadership, and complex logistics would result in my helping to lead this dynamic church and Compassion International.

From my current vantage point, when I look back I see many, many closed doors. But when I connect the dots, they form the unmistakable shape of God's hand!

In preparing and meditating on this chapter I had a metaphoric "aha" moment that I'd like to share. I came to realize that instead of life being a linear path from which we should not stray, (the Straight and Narrow, if you will), life and the faith journey are more like a labyrinth or maze.



Open doors often lead to nowhere. Deciding which path not to take can be as important as choosing the right path. Counter-intuitively, closed doors can help with those choices.

My family used to live in England, where hedge mazes are so extensive that people get really lost, and actually panic and freak out because they feel trapped.



Mazes like Hampton Court and Longleat have towers where a guide, high above the labyrinth can guide such people with gentle, and sometimes not so gentle, guidance of “No, not that way...not that way.” Other times they encourage them with “Yes, that’s the right path” or “you’re doing fine...keep on going.”



Even when they can’t see the guide’s tower, the lost visitor constantly looks up for reassurance that the guide is still in sight, and listens for a voice they can trust. Eventually, they make it to safety not by paths opening, but by blocking paths that would make them even more lost.

Friends, I know life can be really hard. People hurt us,

circumstances are often beyond our control, and sometimes doors just keep slamming shut in our faces.

But no matter how discouraged, no matter how lost we may feel, there’s One we can always look up to for guidance, and hope, and encouragement. We can listen for His voice, and find comfort in knowing He is there to guide us, and to help us when we’ve lost our way. He wants to do that, wants that kind of a relationship with us, and earnestly desires that we open the door of our hearts to let Him in.

When the way seems blocked and you don’t know which way to go, remember that Jesus said: I am the way, I am the truth and the life that you seek when all the doors seem to close in your face.

But the ironic thing is it’s the door to our heart that keeps God out.

In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”

He’s talking about the door to our hearts, and the latch is on the inside. Maybe today is the day you’ll open it for the first time, or open it wider. If you do He will come in, and share in a special meal.

Let’s pray:

Lord Jesus, so often we look for You to open doors when You are knowingly directing us in totally unexpected directions. We acknowledge Lord that Your plans are not the same as our plans, and that everything works out for

good according to Your purpose.

Help us discern your call on our life. Help us to keep moving rather than be stalled by life’s disappointments. Help us see that small doors can lead to vast opportunities.

But most of all Lord, help us hear You knocking at the door to our hearts, and remember the love and sacrifice You made for us through Your journey to the Cross, Amen.

* * * * *

Note: Ron Mathieu is the Executive Director at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com