

Sermon 7th Sunday of Easter Year C May 19, 2010

Some years ago an energetic young man began as a clerk in a hardware store. Like many old-time hardware stores, the inventory included thousands of dollars' worth of items that were obsolete or seldom called for by customers. The young man was smart enough to know that no thriving business could carry such an inventory and still show a healthy profit. He proposed a sale to get rid of the stuff. The owner was reluctant but finally agreed to let him set up a table in the middle of the store and try to sell off a few of the oldest items. Every product was priced at ten cents.

The sale was a success and the young fellow got permission to run a second sale. It, too, went over just as well as the first. This gave the young clerk an idea. Why not open a store that would sell only nickel and dime items? He could run the store and his boss could supply the capital. The young man's boss was not enthusiastic. "The plan will never work," he said, "because you can't find enough items to sell at a nickel and a dime." The young man was disappointed but eventually went ahead on his own and made a fortune out of the idea. His name was F.W. Woolworth. Years later his old boss lamented, "As near as I can figure it, every word I used in turning Woolworth down has cost me about a million dollars!"

Today's story from Acts takes us with Paul on his journey to Philippi where he preached for the first time on European soil and where he baptized Lydia, a purple dye merchant, in a river to the west of

the city. While in Philippi, his exorcism of a demon from a slave girl caused a great uproar in the city, which led to their (Paul and Silas) arrest, public beating, and imprisonment. An earthquake caused their prison to be opened. When the jailer awoke, he prepared to kill himself, thinking all the prisoners had escaped and knowing that he would be severely punished. Paul stopped him, indicating that all the prisoners were in fact still there. The jailer then became one of the first Christians in Europe (Acts 16:25-40).

The point I want to focus on briefly is the part that God opens a door just when all we can see is locked doors. When Woolworth had the door to his idea shut by his boss, another door opened was opened for him. You and I know of lots of stories where doors may seem locked shut only for new ones to be opened in unexpected ways. I am here at St. James' because of one such incident.

When I lived in Washington DC for 25 years I had a career with a trade association that represented home care and hospice on the national level. I was the senior tenured staff member and a vice president of the company. After 20 years of service I knew my work was done. At the height of my career where some thought I was being groomed to be the next president of the association I realized that a call to do something different was lurking in my mind. Without any plan for the future I left my career of 20 years...A move that most people thought was crazy. I shut a door without any idea of what I was going to do, but I did have faith that something would happen, and it did.

A friend of mine who was a Methodist minister took me to lunch and said why don't you do one unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Asbury Methodist Village to just clear your head for your next step. I went out there and interviewed and was accepted for what was to be a three month adventure. Two weeks into this adventure the chaplain for the assisted living building was fired and I applied for the job. What was supposed to be three months became two years—two years in which the elderly in this retirement community helped me see that I had a call to ordained ministry. I have those people to thank for being here today.

There is much more to this story that I will share as time goes by, but suffice to say that a door that was closed tightly provided an opportunity for God to create an earthquake in my life that loosed something for me and here I am today.

In the earthquakes of our lives lie the seeds to new life...the possibility for new doors to be opened that we cannot see or imagine. In those moments of unemployment, illness, misfortune lie seeds of new life. New doors that seemed barred shut to us can surprisingly be opened in ways we do not now see. The secret is to surrender our will and trust that God will open a new door and bring new life where there doesn't seem to be any life.