



# JENNIFER'S Farewell Sermon

## Sermon Growth Guide

**September 1, 2024**

**An Open Heart**



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**Acts 16:11-15**

**Key Verse:** Acts 16:14c

"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."

**Big Idea:** It is the work of the Holy Spirit to open hearts to respond to the good news of Jesus.

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## Foundations

This week we look at a little story in the book of Acts about Lydia and how the Lord plants his church in Philippi. In this story we get a front row view of the Holy Spirit orchestrating the opening of a heart. Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke are on a missionary journey to share the gospel. The Holy Spirit is their guide, and they are learning together to follow the Spirit's instructions. The Spirit leads this little band of travelers to Philippi, to a river outside the city walls on the Sabbath. The river was the place of prayer where worshippers of God gathered if there was no synagogue in the city. John Stott writes this: "There seems to be no synagogue in Philippi, but there was a place of prayer (as the missionaries had expected there would be), which was just over a mile outside the city gate...Since Luke adds the congregation consisted of women, it is usually assumed this explains the non-existence of a synagogue: a quorum of ten men was necessary before a synagogue could be started." (Stott, The Message of Acts, p. 245). That morning, the Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message. Maybe you will remember how and when the Lord opened your heart to the message of the gospel. If you haven't already shared that story, maybe start there!

## Understanding God's Word

Together, read Acts 16:6-10 for context. What do you hear, observe, notice about how the Holy Spirit leads Paul and his companions? Read Acts 16:11-15. Why was it important for this missionary team to arrive at the river on this particular morning? What do you notice about this special encounter?

## Applying God's Word

When Lydia is baptized along with her whole household, she invites and then persuades Paul and his companions to stay at her home. The opening of her heart leads her to open her home. Talk about the significance of this invitation.

## Witnessing God's Word

As you think about the people in your life who do not yet know the good news, how is the Lord orchestrating your life to intersect theirs? Do you see signs of openness? If so, what are they? Pray together for the people in your pathway during the week. Ask God to help you be present, to pay attention to how God is at work in your interactions. Pray that the Lord would open their hearts to respond to the good news!

## AN OPEN HEART • Acts 16:11-15 • Jennifer Holz • September 1, 2024

Good morning, friends. So good to see you all and be here with you. It feels natural and familiar even though our lives have taken a dramatic turn to the west. To a place of immense beauty, I'm not going to lie! But if we have to leave the breathtaking view of the mountains, I am thankful to God for placing us in another space of stunning beauty.

A year ago, I could not have told you what would be happening to our family right now. But I will say that about this time last year, I had a sense of these words from the Holy Spirit: "Be open." Adam was sensing it too, but we didn't know that still small voice was speaking those two words to both of us until weeks later. Be open.

You may not know that I was born in California. So, it wasn't a huge geographical stretch when the invitation came to consider this call. I know people seem to be fleeing California right now—for a number of reasons, but for us, California is where we want to be. Well, okay. I should speak for myself. Change is hard. Everyone in our family is going at their own pace in accepting and receiving this new season. Some days are hard. Some are exciting. And we are learning together to trust God with the details.

But I am grateful that the body of Christ is everywhere, and the Carmel Presbyterian Church family was our family even before we knew them. We are all family thanks to Jesus.

So, what to preach for my final sermon here?! I chose this little gem of a story in Acts 16. One of my favorites. Not just because Lydia is an accomplished woman and the church of Philippi begins in her home under her leadership, but because we get to trace the movement of the Holy Spirit orchestrating the opening of a heart to respond to the good news of Jesus.

God is ready to plant a church in Philippi, and as usual, he will bring unusual people together to get it started.

Read Acts 16:11-15

In July, we hosted a fantastic VBS here with almost 400 kids. We prepared and prayed for the kids. We deeply desired that the Lord would work in each child's heart. I got to lead the Bible Adventure rotation with the elementary kids—with my trusted

Bible helpers: Mike, Helen, Nancy. The sets were amazing. Thank you Sara and Family ministries. They created a gigantic whale for the Jonah story that held 40 kids inside. But the last story we shared with the kids was the story of Lydia and the purple cloth. And in talking with the kids about this story, I was reminded again that only the Lord has the power to open a heart to know and respond to him.

How's your heart this morning? Are you expecting the Lord to open your heart and speak to you today?

I think for me, after almost 24 years of pastoring here, my heart today feels a lot of things. It's a bit heavy as we close this chapter of ministry here. It's also hopeful as we anticipate a new season of ministry in Carmel, trusting God with a big change. We believe that the Lord opened our hearts to this call and helped us to joyfully respond. Just as he opened my heart to come back here in the Fall of 2000 and answer this call.

Perhaps Lydia arrived at the river on that Sabbath morning with her sisters delightfully unaware of what the day would hold. But faithfully the women arrive to pray on the Sabbath, the day set aside by God from creation to rest and enjoy his presence. They are in the perfect place for God to speak to them.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, we learn from chapter 16 that Paul and his missionary team are also being led to the river outside Philippi that morning. Luke is the one keeping the travel log, and we read in the verses just before our story that their spiritual GPS is constantly rerouting them. Sometimes blocking their progress. Then leading them forward to another seeming dead end. Only to be followed by a new path that opens at the right moment. As this mission team discusses, shares and ponders the meaning of these circumstances together, they come to a shared understanding of how God is leading them from Troas to Samothrace to Neapolis and to Philippi.

Theologian John Stott puts it this way: "God led them by a combination of factors, over a period of time, ending when they pondered their meaning together." Together.

It's no accident that Paul travels with a team. It's no accident that Lydia prays with a group of women. The Holy Spirit moves us out of

isolation into community. And in community we navigate life. A prayer partner, a life group, a mentoring friendship, a mission team. The Holy Spirit pulls us together to help us see the way forward.

I've discovered in Carmel, CA that dogs are actually the most important people in the town. Our dog Winston, surprisingly not only adjusted quickly, but has found his true calling in being treated as royalty. Dogs are everywhere. They are allowed to enter stores with their owners, they run free on the beach, doggy bags are provided on corners so you can clean up after them. This is all thanks to Doris Day, who, upon visiting Carmel decades ago insisted that dogs be welcomed in every setting. But perhaps the most fun part of this is how many people I meet when take Winston out for a walk.

So, you might be asking, Who is the dog in this story, Harry? Well, I hesitate to compare the Holy Spirit to the dogs of Carmel, but somebody has to do the work of breaking the ice between people who might not ever meet. Let's just say the Holy Spirit is an expert at bringing unlikely people together.

Sometimes in the moment, we aren't sure what God is doing in our lives, but as we faithfully respond to the call to trust, to worship, to pray, to seek God together, to ponder both the open doors and the closed doors together ... we can look back and see the hand of the Spirit guiding us right where we are supposed to be.

At the river outside Philippi is exactly where Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke were supposed to be on that particular Sabbath morning. And they concluded that together. The Holy Spirit is going to open a heart on that very morning, and every person at that river has a part of play.

The story continues. "We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth." (v. 14)

Most cities are known for something. As I've told people where we are from, I've discovered that Colorado Springs is known for its beauty and the Broadmoor. In the Presbyterian world, Colorado Springs is known for this amazing church.

I want to thank you all of you who have sent me pictures of Clint Eastwood's former mansion, which is for sale right now. I think

21 million is the price tag. It's on our list, of course. It sits right on the ocean. It's a gorgeous place. Carmel By the Sea is known for its dog-friendliness and for its former mayor Clint Eastwood. We haven't seen him yet, but we know plenty of people who have met him. He's well-liked and known for being personable and friendly.

Thyatira, about 300 miles outside Philippi, had been celebrated for centuries for its dyes. An early inscription mentions a guild of dyers in that town. Lydia's specialization was in the expensive purple dye. John Stott speculates she was an agent of a Thyatiran manufacturer.

I love that Luke includes these details about this remarkable woman. Her name: Lydia. Her vocation: a dealer of purple cloth. We can imagine that their Sabbath conversation moved from topic to topic.

When God's people enter Sabbath time there is not an urgency of information sharing. Rather there is space for restful relational discussion. There is time to tell stories and exchange laughter and tall tales. As Paul would articulate in another letter, he and his friends likely not only shared the gospel with these women, but they shared their lives. These friendships would become dear to Paul and his companions. In Paul's letter of encouragement to the Philippian church years later, we gain a sense of joy, love, friendship and family that he had with this church.

Luke tells us that Lydia is baptized, as is her whole household. We don't know who that includes, but likely servants, any children. Lydia seems to be the head of her household. Perhaps she is a widow. We don't know, but when the Lord opens Lydia's heart to the gospel, she in turn opens the door to her home.

"If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us' (v. 15).

We are in the middle of the agonizing process of changing homes right now. After living in our current home for 15 years, there are many decisions to make—what to sell, what to keep, what to throw out or donate, what to store. Adam is doing most of this painful work while the girls and I have moved into the church's manse in Carmel. We have the easy part. Adam should get a medal or a trophy or something shiny. Thanks to friends who are helping him.

Our family is staying with my mom this weekend. In fact, my younger brother Jason is also here. And Jeff and his wife Stacy are down this morning. This is the home of our childhood. Where I have so many memories of people coming over, parties, celebrations. From school gatherings to Dale House Christmas parties, to debate team movie nights to slumber parties and church events. What a gift on this weekend to be together. There is nothing like an open home, shared dinners and watching Caitlin Clark and the Indiana Fever on the big screen beat the Chicago Sky.

Out west, we have been warmly welcomed by the people of Carmel Presbyterian Church. Open homes, walks, dinners, furniture, prayer...We feel at home with them even though everything around us is new and unfamiliar. There is nothing quite like the body of Christ.

Maybe you are new to this body of believers at First Pres—but I hope you are already feeling at home. This church has is and has been a home to so many Jesus followers here in Colorado Springs. If you haven't yet found a church to call home, I highly recommend this one. And today we get to share a home-fixed meal in communion. Jesus has set the table for us today, and as believers we share in this redemptive meal.

My final reflection today is this: when the Holy Spirit orchestrates the opening of a heart, an entire community feels the welcome of Christ. Lydia opening her home as her first act of Christian commitment is the most natural, obvious and seamless expression of what she has just discovered. The heart of Christ is open to all and in him we find our true home. Theologian Dale Bruner names this moment in acts as evidence of the most basic fruit of the spirit: love.

Because of Lydia's open heart, the church in Philippi now has a place to call home—to meet, to fellowship, to gather, and connect. In her living space, new believers will be welcomed and loved.

Luke records that the next new believers to find their home in Christ here in Philippi will be a young slave girl who has been exploited for money and a Roman jailer who is on the brink of ending his life. These three people: a Gentile businesswoman, a slave girl and a Roman jailer—who would seem to

have nothing in common, are now brought together as family.

As usual, the Holy Spirit opens the hearts of the most unusual people and knits them together to form the church. I don't know what you know about the people you are sitting next to today, but my guess is that if it wasn't for Jesus, you might not be sitting next to each other! Maybe check in with the people around you after the service and see if this is true!

Here's the thing, friends: wherever God's people exist, we find our home. Because in Christ we are all at home. You have welcomed me "home" today and each time we visit in the future, we will always feel at home here. When you come to visit us in Carmel (and I hope you will), I can tell you that you will also feel at home there with God's people.

So, yes, this is goodbye as we go to minister at Carmel Presbyterian Church, but we know our true home is in Christ. There is sadness today, for sure. We will miss one another's presence. I'm looking forward to hugging as many of you as I can at the reception today!

As I close today, I'm going to read Paul's words to the Philippian church—because they resonate with me and how I feel about you.

Read Philippians 1:3-11

Amen.