

The sermon “Open Hearts, Open Doors”
Preached by Rev. Peter J. Blank
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What does it mean to live with open hearts and open doors in a divided world?

In a time when even family dinners can be minefields, when churches are tempted to retreat into comfort or uniformity, Acts 16 offers us a witness from the early church that couldn't be more relevant. We meet Lydia—a businesswoman, a seeker of God, and the first documented convert to Christianity in Europe. Her story is one of spiritual hunger, radical hospitality, and deep courage. She models what it means to open her heart to the gospel, and her doors to the community.

And in doing so, Lydia becomes not just a host, but a bridge-builder. Not just a follower of Christ, but a leader in a new movement. Her home becomes church. Her table becomes sanctuary. Her heart becomes a space where the Spirit stirs.

This passage unfolds during Paul's second missionary journey. Paul and his companions travel northwest across the Aegean Sea to Philippi, a prominent Roman colony. Lydia, originally from Thyatira in modern-day Turkey, is likely in Philippi for business—trading in the region's famous purple cloth. She's successful, respected, and spiritually curious.

Philippi was a pluralistic city. Multiple languages. Multiple cultures. Multiple faiths. Think of it like Portland—diverse, evolving, a place where conversations about values and identity are both necessary and challenging. And that's where Lydia has chosen to live and lead.

The text tells us that Lydia is a “worshiper of God”—a Gentile drawn to Jewish faith—and her heart is already open when Paul begins to speak. We're told “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly.” That openness wasn't passive. It was active. Responsive. Transformative. She doesn't just listen; she acts. She and her household are baptized. She insists that Paul and his companions stay in her home. She opens her doors.

Lydia's home becomes the first Christian gathering place in Europe. Think about that. The church in the West is born not in a synagogue or temple or palace—but in a woman's home, because her heart and her doors were open.

Rev. Dr. Leah Schade suggests that Lydia's table was what we might call today a “purple space”—a place for holy, hard conversations among diverse people. Imagine the scene: fresh bread and wine, purple cloths, prayers rising. And around the table, people of different backgrounds, temperaments, and convictions, sharing not only a meal but their lives.

And I wonder: what conversations unfolded in that sacred space?

Right after this story, Paul and Silas free a slave-girl from demonic exploitation. But the text tells us it took several days for them to act. That makes me think they hesitated. That they wrestled with the implications. And maybe—just maybe—they processed all of that at Lydia's table.

Imagine it:

Paul and Silas return weary from a long day of teaching. Lydia welcomes them with food and shelter. They share a meal. They pray. And then Silas says, “There’s a girl who follows us. She’s enslaved. Used by others. Possessed.”

Lydia replies, “That’s Salome. She has no freedom. She earns nothing for herself. And it’s wrong.”

Paul hesitates: “But slavery is built into the economy. Scripture doesn’t outright forbid it. If we intervene, we could put your home and our mission at risk.”

Lydia responds, “Jesus didn’t tell us to love scripture more than our neighbor. He told us to love God and love our neighbor. And that means opening our hearts not just to ideas—but to action.”

That conversation may have changed everything. Because the next day, Paul and Silas act. They free the girl. They disrupt the system. And they are thrown in jail.

And when they are released? They go straight back to Lydia’s house. And she opens the door.

Open hearts. Open doors.

That’s what Lydia models. And that’s what the church is called to model—especially in our polarized age.

To live with open hearts means letting the Spirit disturb our comfort.

To live with open doors means making room for those whose presence may challenge us, stretch us, or require something from us.

It’s not easy. Purple spaces never are. After all, Lydia risked her business. Paul risked his freedom. But the church was born in that space—in that risk—in that welcome.

And so we come now to the Table—our Table, The Communion Table.

This is not a red table or a blue table. Not a liberal or conservative table.

It is the Lord’s Table. And here, all are welcome.

At this Table, we remember the body of Christ, broken for the healing of the world. We remember that we belong not to one political tribe or ideology—but to God.

And that changes everything.

So come. Bring your full self. Your questions. Your convictions. Your burdens. Bring your purple heart. Bring your open hands.

And wear purple—literally or metaphorically—as a reminder of Lydia. A reminder to keep our hearts open. To keep our doors open. To keep the church open to the Spirit’s new thing.

And as always, I won’t finish this sermon alone.

Because we are stitched together like Lydia’s purple cloth, we will finish in song—offering one voice, one hope, one hymn of unity.