

## Open Wide the Door

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

When I was in high school, I started playing chess with my dad. And I continued to play with some friends when I went to college. Now I was never very good, but one of my friends was. And he would do this infuriating thing when we'd play. He would make a move and then tell me, "I just won the game." I would look at the board, look at him, look back at the board, and think to myself, "What in the world is he talking about?"

The game wasn't over. I had plenty of moves I could make. Often when he would say this, it didn't even look to me like he was winning. But he won...every time.

He explained to me that there is something in chess called "the winning move." It's not the same as the last move when someone checkmates the other. The winning move is the move that sets a player up to win. Once the winning move is played, unless the player makes a mistake, there's no way the opponent can win. In the winning move, the outcome is determined even though the game is not yet over.

In the gospel of John, the writer wants to make it clear that Jesus is God's "winning move." Throughout the gospel, John wants us to know that Jesus is in control. He knows what is going to happen. And he knows how the story will end. The gospel starts by making this point crystal clear.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life,<sup>[a]</sup> and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.*

What follows will be a story that will include Jesus' arrest and execution. But before we get to any of that, the gospel of John wants us to know that the light overcomes the darkness. Jesus is playing the game on a different level. Jesus has played the winning move when other people don't even realize it.

And just to make sure we get the point, the writer of John, gives us clues throughout the gospel about what will happen. He tells stories that foreshadow a later story. We have Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in chapter 11 that foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection. We have Mary anointing Jesus' feet with oil that foreshadows Jesus washing the disciples feet. And we have this story we read today about Greeks seeking Jesus out. And then Jesus talking about his death.

This story of the Greeks visiting Jesus happens right after Jesus enters Jerusalem for his last week before his crucifixion. In the gospel of John, the cross represents Jesus' greatest victory. He turns this instrument of death into a symbol for life and, in doing so, defeats death forever. In the gospel reading this morning, in speaking of his death, Jesus says, "The rule of this world

will be driven out. Later in the gospel of John, Jesus' last words before he dies are, "It is finished," or some translations have, "It is accomplished." The winning move has been played. And that means that the way of Jesus will be the ultimate reality.

Light has driven out darkness.

Goodness has overcome evil.

And one specific thing Jesus' victory means is exactly what Jesus says in our passage, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

John knows that the early Christians will have to learn to embrace Gentiles, to embrace Greeks in the early church, so he foreshadows that here.

When the early Christian movement began, none of the early Christians thought they were starting a new religion. They all were Jewish people who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who had come to save his people. And that was true, but incomplete. The early Christians couldn't imagine that Jesus had come not just for one group of people, but for the whole world, for every person from every nation from every culture – until God got a hold of a guy named Saul of Tarsus as he was travelling to Damascus to put Christians in jail. Not only did Saul become a follower of Jesus and change his name to Paul, but he had a vision that Jesus was not only here to bring salvation to his people, but to every people. Paul realized that both he and his ancestors had too narrow an understanding of who was included and too small a view of God. God is big enough to be the God of everyone and that means the Church must be a place where all people are welcome.

This message was not without controversy. Other Christian leaders thought Paul was too loose with his interpretation of Scripture, too loose with accepting that which they thought was unclean, and Paul's response was always, "Who am I to question the work of God's spirit." You see, Paul believed that Gentiles were accepted by God just as the Jewish people were because he saw that the Holy Spirit was at work in their lives. He defined the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self control, and he argued that if the fruits of the Spirit are evident in someone's life, then who are we to keep them out. In other words, the Gentiles are God's people because the Holy Spirit is working in them just as the Holy Spirit is working in us. Notice that Paul's opponents turned to rules and law and Paul turned to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The gospel of John was written decades after Paul's death. By the time John was written, the church was made up of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of Christian followers and Christianity had spread far and wide. John was writing for communities that knew Gentiles were fully welcomed and included. But he wants us to know why.

In telling the story of the Greeks coming to Jesus, John wants us to know that all of Paul's work, the work of Greeks being a full part of the Christian community happened because Jesus had already played the winning move...even though not everyone in Jesus' day realized it yet.

And that same dynamic continues today.

Rules, law, narrow interpretations of Scripture are used time and again to try to keep people out. Unfortunately, the Christian church has a less than stellar track record when it comes to keeping people out. The Gentiles were out because of the rule. Women weren't allowed to preach because of the rule. Gay marriage was prohibited because of the rule. And each time rules are used to keep people out, the Holy Spirit blows up the rule because Jesus has already played the winning move.

Friends, every single example we have in the history of Christianity of the Holy Spirit being at work is one where the Church had to learn to open its doors wider. Every single example.

Through Paul, the Holy Spirit taught us that Gentiles are included.

Through the desert mystics, the Holy Spirit taught us that God's kingdom is bigger than the Roman empire.

Through Martin Luther and the leaders of the Reformation, the Holy Spirit showed us that we all have access to God, not just the priests and clergy among us.

Through New England abolitionists, the Holy Spirit taught us that slavery is an affront to God.

Through Antoinette Brown Blackwell, the first woman ordained as clergy in the United States – (she was a congregationalist by the way), the Holy Spirit showed us that God calls women just as God calls men and that it is the church's loss when we deny that calling.

And we could go on and on with more examples.

Friends, I said it a minute ago, and I'll say it again, there is not a single time in all of Christian history where the Holy Spirit said to us, "You need to be more exclusive." "You need more rules." Every single time, the Holy Spirit said, open your doors wider. God is bigger than you thought. God's family is bigger than you previously imagined.

Now, we are part of a progressive denomination – the United Church of Christ. We have been an open and affirming church for a long time now. The idea that all people belong is our very first priority. In many ways, I'm preaching to the choir with this sermon.

I know that this church values being a place that is always looking to open the door wider. But I want us to know why. I think often there is this assumption that churches that preach inclusion and acceptance are just preaching some sort of politically correct, liberal ideology.

But y'all, it goes so much deeper than that.

When Jesus said that through his work on the cross, he will draw all people to himself, he's telling us that working for inclusion and acceptance is not something we do in spite of the gospel but because of it. We are an open community for all because that is who the Holy Spirit has called us to be. That is the victory that Jesus has accomplished for us.

If we were to read all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we would see two constant themes. First, anytime someone was considered an outcast, Jesus always welcomed them. And anytime someone was excluded, Jesus always got mad about it.

Friends, as we explore the ways we practice and live out our faith this Lent, let us remember that anytime we try to shut the door to someone, the Holy Spirit is there to kick it open. And let's remember that we are a church that is open for all because Jesus has already gained the victory. Jesus has already shown us that the way of God is the way of embracing all people.

The game may still be going on, but God has already played the winning move in Jesus, so let me give us a hint how this story ultimately ends:

Love wins. Always.

Amen.