

31 October, 1999  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
Mark James Toone

**YOU'VE GOT MAIL:  
OVERCOMING POWERLESSNESS  
Revelation 3.7-13**

Before we start this morning, I want to add my voice to those who have invited you to be a part of the All-Church dinners next weekend. You've heard many good reasons: To celebrate what God has done, to look ahead to the future through the work of the strategic plan. I want to give you another. There are very few times that we pull together our whole church family in a time of celebration and fellowship. We are too large to do it often. So when we do, I hate to see anyone miss out. Whether you are a friend or a member of this church, if you consider Chapel Hill to be your home, please make a commitment to join us at one of the two remaining dinners. It will be a great experience for you, you will learn a lot about the work of your church and it will be a wonderful opportunity for us all to come together in the name of Jesus for a celebration of his faithful goodness to us.

This morning, as we continue through the seven letters of Revelation, we notice a complete change in tone. Let's think back over the last few letters. It's been pretty rough going. The Pergamites were chastised for their idolatry. The Thyatirans for their immorality. The Sardisians for their hypocrisy. Wow. After three weeks of idolatry, immorality and hypocrisy, we might all feel a bit exhausted. But things change when Jesus speaks to the church of Philadelphia.

As you know, Philadelphia means "City of Brotherly Love," so called because of the love that existed between two brothers who founded the city back in the second century BC. It was utterly destroyed in a devastating earthquake in 17 AD and rebuilt with many beautiful temples. It was called "little Athens."

Did you notice what was missing in this letter to the Philadelphian church that you find in every other letter save that to the church at Smyrna? There is no word of

reproach. Remember? In every other letter we hear those scary words from Jesus, "Nevertheless, I have this against you." But Jesus doesn't have a word of criticism for the Philadelphians. Perhaps it is because he knows that they cannot bear anything else.

Judging from the words of Jesus, how would you describe the state of the church in Philadelphia? In one word, what would it be? Weak? Weary? Powerless? Listen to v. 8: "I know that you have little strength..." The Philadelphian church was beaten up. Apparently the Jewish community had excommunicated them because of their faith in Jesus. Suddenly, their religious roots were ripped from the ground. The spiritual community of which they had been a part had kicked them out. They no longer had a home. And it had completely taken the wind out of their sails.

I love the bagpipes. Having lived in St. Andrews, Scotland for two years, the sound of the pipes is a precious reminder of a precious time. When we returned for sabbatical in 1993, Rachel was only nine months old. Our apartment looked out over a field. There a pipe band practiced many nights of the week. Rachel fell asleep listening to the plaintive sounds of the pipes. I know that there might be one or two heretics among you who do not find this instrument to be the smoothest and sweetest of sounds ever invented. But for the rest of us...us true Presbyterians ...it is a wonderful sound.

Except...there is one moment when even we Scots purists don't find it particularly pleasing. When the piper quits blowing into the pipes and the last of the air escapes, it gives a plaintive, gasping sound. Jack...could you give us a demonstration? Under full air, they are glorious. But they nearly weep when they run out of gas. And they nearly make us weep. Sounds like two cats in a bag.

The Philadelphians had run out of gas. All the wind had been sucked out of them. They were under attack for their faith, they had been kicked out of their church, the doors had been slammed shut on them. They felt weak, weary, powerless. Powerless in that they had no influence. They had been kicked out of their congregation. They did not have the social strength to bring to bear in this situation. They were nobodies. And powerless, I suspect, in that they were so discouraged, so deflated that they just didn't know

if they could go another step. Jesus knew exactly where his beloved Philadelphians were: "I know that you have little strength..."

We had a minor emergency in our house this last week that illustrated this sense of powerlessness in a couple of ways. A few weeks ago, I finally succumbed to the pleadings of the rest of my family and we got a cat. It was a free cat from a man who was *just* a wee bit tardy in getting his cat spayed. He now had 12 kittens to show for it. So, we went and picked up this free cat. Rachel named her "Kit." And she is a cutie, I have to admit.

Last week, we noticed that Kit was really laboring in her breathing. We also noticed that she seemed skinnier than we remembered her being. After a couple days, Cyndi took her into the vet. I got a tearful phone call from her that morning. "The vet says that Kit has some sort of condition in her bowel. We may have to put her to sleep. So I rushed home, we went and got Rachel out of school, went through the horrible experience of telling her that her kitty was probably not going to live, and then went to the vet for her to say goodbye.

When we got there, we looked at the X rays. It was pretty amazing. Somehow, her little diaphragm had ruptured and all of her lower bowels had been pushed up in her chest cavity. That's why she looked so skinny. All her guts had slid forward. She couldn't breathe because the small intestine was crowding her lungs. I looked at that little cat and she was absolutely drained. It took everything she had just to take another big, gasping breath.

The vet said, "It's 50-50. I can do surgery but I can't be sure that she'll survive. You know what my first instinct was, don't you? Especially you men. This kitty is two weeks old and already we're performing a major surgery that has no reasonable certainty of success. I looked at this heaving kitty, the X rays, and I thought, "There is only one reasonable thing to do."

Then I went in to tell Rachel. And when she looked at me with those tearful, hopeful eyes, I discovered another kind of powerlessness. I didn't have any choice. I told the vet to perform the surgery. I am pleased to say that Kit is still

with us, though she's not out of the woods. And I am now into my free kitty for about \$500.

Do you ever feel that way? Feel like life is squeezing you so desperately that you can hardly breathe? Feel like you are stuck between two bad choices and you are absolutely powerless to influence the outcome? I know you have. I know I have. For some reason, a door has slammed shut in your face. Maybe it is a marriage that you have been fighting to hold together but it appears that all hope is gone. I got an e-mail last week from a young man that was a kid in my youth group down in Bakersfield. His wife has decided that she does not love him any more. She has left. She is dating several other men. He is fighting to hold on to his marriage but the reality is beginning to sink in: his marriage is over. That door is closed. And he tells me that he feels like the life has been drained out of him.

Maybe the door of popularity has been slammed shut in your face. You are not one of the "in" crowd at school. You would love to be. You would love to be accepted and welcomed. But for some reason, you don't look or talk or act cool enough. And you are out. And it sucks the life right out of you.

Maybe it was the door of your career. You've just found out that you don't have a job anymore. Ahead of you lies the uncertainty of a new career, you are a middle aged man, and you feel absolutely powerless.

In every age, Christians have faced a sense of powerlessness, of rejection. On this day in 1517 in the town of Wittenberg, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the church door. Ninety-five points that he wished to debate. He just wanted to clean up abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. He ended up being excommunicated. He lived as an outlaw all his life. John Knox was a galley slave for almost two years because of his religious convictions. Calvin was kicked out of Geneva after he had set about to do the things that the city fathers had begged him to do in the first place. John Hus...John Wycliffe... virtually all the reformers of the Church experienced terrible times of rejection and powerlessness. Luther was so depressed at times that it made him sick.

There is not a soul here this morning who has not or will not go through a time when Jesus says to them, "I know that you have little strength left..." Oh, that we might hear the second half of that sentence: "...yet you have kept my word and not denied my name."

Jesus offers a promise and a challenge to us weaklings. What is the promise? Verse 8: "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." Can you see the significance of that promise? Why does that speak to the hearts of the Philadelphian church? Because, the door to their own religious community has been slammed shut on them. They are spiritual exiles. And Jesus says to them, "I know you are homeless, powerless, weary because of what you have faced. But look, I offer you a new home. Here is my kingdom. I have propped the door open for you ...wide open. And unlike what you have experienced in this life, NO ONE will ever shut THIS door on your face."

And the challenge? Verse 11: "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have so that no one will take your crown." "Hang in there," Jesus says. "Don't give up. Don't let go. Cling to what you have and know and believe. Just hold on!"

It is our tradition on St. Andrews Sunday to celebrate the lives of those members of our church who have gone to the Lord before us. And this has been a tough year for us here at Chapel Hill. We said goodbye to some dear, faithful saints. Some of them, as they drew near the end of their life on earth, were weary. Powerless. Exhausted. Some of us who stood by them and prayed for them and believed for a miracle on this earth also grew weary and powerless and exhausted.

Yet to them ...and to us ...the words of Jesus ring out. "I know you have little strength, but behold, I have placed before you and open door that no one can shut." And through that door they went! They have discovered the truth of what Jesus promised. And we who remain behind ...who have more work to do on this earth ...hear Jesus saying to us, "I know you have little strength, but don't give up. Don't lose heart. Hold on to me and to my promises. I will never, ever fail you.

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS OVERCOMING POWERLESSNESS Revelation 3:7-13

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- *After reading the text, think back over the other letters. How is the letter to the Philadelphians different? Why do you suppose it is?*
- *From what you discern in the text, what challenge are the Christians in Philadelphia facing? How has this challenge affected them? What does Jesus promise to do for them? What are the conditions of that promise?*
- *Think back to your time of greatest powerlessness. Perhaps it was a sense of helplessness. Maybe it was a physical challenge or a relational crisis. Share as much as you can. How and when did you recover your strength? What part did God play in that recovery?*
- *The world is full of powerless people. Is there one group or cause that captures your heart? Have you ever dreamed about giving yourself to improving that situation? Share that dream.*
- *Please pray. Pray especially for the church as the session faces budget time. Pray that hundreds will respond to the stewardship dinner and that it will be a powerful and effective evening.*