"Open" October 26, 2025
Deuteronomy 15:1-11 Westminster, Greenville
20th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr
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This morning is our annual stewardship sermon.

But before we get to the stewardship part, I want to talk about a group of leaders, giants of their time, who lived over 100 years ago, and they called themselves...the Vagabonds.

Have you ever heard of the Vagabonds?
Henry Ford, Thomas Edison,
Harvey Firestone, and John Burroughs.

Back in the 1910's and 1920's, these four men began taking camping trips together. Do you remember who those individuals were?

Henry Ford—easy enough, right?
Ford Motor Company.

Thomas Edison—the genius of electric light.

Harvey Firestone—if you can't place that name, just go check out the tires on some of the cars in our parking lot.

John Burroughs—perhaps today, the least known of the group, he was a famous naturalist, and a friend of Teddy Roosevelt's.

These four giants of their era spent 8 or 9 summers piling into early automobiles and setting out on the back roads of the Alleghenies or Adirondacks. They weren't exactly roughing it. They were accompanied by cooks and drivers, they had means.

But part of what they were doing, besides cooking over open fires, was opening their lives to the UNKNOWN...

Ford tested how his cars held up on mountain roads.
Edison tinkered with portable lighting.

Burroughs lectured them on the importance of nature—even when it made the other three uncomfortable. Around campfires, they debated politics, science, faith, and the future.

Now what's fascinating to me is that these men were not perfect models of open-mindedness in all things.

Henry Ford spread terrible antisemitism throughout his life.
Harvey Firestone's operations in Liberia meant horrible conditions for the employees who worked there.

In particular ways, their minds were closed, hardened, and they could not see the world in a different way. But in other ways...in other ways, the Vagabonds were open to new discoveries, and to different points of view...[1]

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Have you ever thought about what it means to be OPEN?

Open is an important word around here.

What's the vision of Westminster?
Open minds, Open hearts.

What's the theme of our stewardship campaign this year?

[1] "Off the Paved Road," by Elizabeth Lynn & Mark Ramsey, The Ministry Collaborative, October 9, 2025.

Open.
And we'll get to the stewardship sermon in a moment.

But I want to stick with the word...open.
Getting open, being open...it's not a new idea.
It's old idea.
In fact, it's a biblical idea.

And our text from Deuteronomy this morning is a fascinating example.

In fact, I would submit that Deuteronomy 15 is one of the most radical passages you'll ever read in the Bible.

Verse 7: "If there is among you anyone in need...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need."

Well, so far so good.
Doesn't sound too wild and crazy, right?

It's not even a passage about giving charity to one's neighbor.
It's a passage about lending to one's neighbor.
In anticipation that what is lent will be returned.

But notice the context for these words.

This verse is found in a larger passage about the sabbatical year of remission. Do you know what that was? Every seven years, the people of Israel were to grant a remission of debts.

It was one of the laws that they were to abide by when they started living in the Promised Land.

Anyone to whom you lent something was free of their debt on the seventh year. And it wasn't simply a matter of paying off the loan within seven years.

No...the sabbatical year was already set ahead of time.
Pretend that 2026 was going to be the year.

Someone in need comes to you tomorrow, and says:
I can't pay my hospital bill.
I need $5,000.

So you lend them $5,000.
And they start to pay you back next month...$250 in November.
And $250 in December.
At that rate they would pay you back 20 months from now.

But then January of 2026 rolls around.
It's the sabbatical year of remission.

Which means that $4,500 of what you loaned to your neighbor...is now forgiven. You know, whenever I hear some politician say that we need to bring the Bible back into our society more, play more by God's rules...I never hear them quoting this text as the rule that they want to bring back.

It's a beautiful text.
It's a radical text.
It's a text that serves as a good reminder to us all of what it means to love our neighbors.

Verse 9: "Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing..."

Why did they do it?

Why did the Israelites construct their economy this way?

The answer is easy.

As Moses reminds them, they do it because of what God did for them. Just like God set them free from the burden of bondage to Pharaoh, they would set their neighbor free—every seven years...free of their debt, free from their burden.

Just like God opened a new future for you, says Moses, so too should you do the same for your neighbor. Not only will it help your neighbor, Moses says. It will be a reminder of who it was who saved you.

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What does that word open...mean to you?
Is it an important word in your faith?
It was an important word in John Mulder's faith.

The Rev. John Mulder is a former seminary president, and a lifelong Presbyterian.

"One might say I was predestined to be a Presbyterian," he writes.

"I was born, baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. I was ordained to be a Presbyterian minister. I taught for seven years at Princeton Theological Seminary, and then became the president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary…"

Then, he writes, on September 11, 2002, "I crashed."

What caused the crash?
An undiagnosed bipolar illness.
A horrifying breach of boundaries and ethics.

He found himself, at that time, in "a pattern of drinking that had progressed into full-blown alcoholism."

"I had to resign as president of Louisville," Mulder says, "and in the following year I struggled to deal with the physical, spiritual and moral wreckage of my life."

Eventually, Mulder went to a rehab program.
And all throughout the program, he kept praying one prayer:
"Please Lord, forgive me."

For months, he prayed that prayer.
And nothing happened.
He felt no closer to God.

Finally, Mulder says he gave up that prayer, and without knowing why, he prayed a different prayer:

"God open me up. Please open me up."

One morning, in the house with many other people in recovery with whom he was living at that time, as Mulder was making breakfast for himself, by himself, he describes being surrounded by white light.

"It was not blinding or frightening but warm and embracing. At first, there were no voices or sounds, but as the light subsided, I eventually heard [these words]:

'You are not alone.'"

This experience, says Mulder, made all the difference.

Later on, the staff at the treatment center told him that this event marked the beginning of his recovery. He reached out to all those he

had wronged, seeking another chance to start over with his life again and to rebuild their trust with him again.

As Mulder puts it, "It all began with a simple prayer:
'God, open me up.'"[2]

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I asked you a moment ago to consider what the word "open" means to you.

It's not a bad question.
But maybe the better question is what it means to God.

Consider the first text we heard today.

Two disciples on the road to Emmaus.
It's Easter evening.
A stranger comes to walk with them.

When the day is nearly done and they reach the village, this stranger intends to keep going, but what do those disciples do?

They open their doors to him.
They open their table to him.

And do you remember how Luke puts it?

"...he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."

Please note, the disciples didn't open their own eyes.

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[2] "Finding God," by The Rev. John Mulder, in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 18, 2013. The story is also told by John Mulder in *Finding God: A Treasury of Conversion Stories*, edited by John Mulder with Hugh T. Kerr, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.

"Then their eyes were opened..."
That's how Luke puts it.

It means that getting open...is nothing less than a miracle of God.

Let's get to our stewardship sermon.

This year, we're inviting all members of Westminster to participate in the Open Door Challenge. If half of our membership increases their giving by $1,000 in 2026, and the other half can increase by $500, we will reach our goal of $300,000 additional dollars pledged to our church.

Why is this the goal?

1. The Session needs to fully fund two new administrative staff positions, so that our finance and facilities departments have enough hands-on-deck.

For example, there's only one person on our staff who knows how to cut paychecks, pay the bills...if that individual needed to take a 6-week-medical leave for some reason, do you how the bills would be paid and your gifts would be recorded?

I don't either.
We have to have these staff positions, that you don't see on Sunday morning—we have to have them filled.

And we need to fully fund the growth that's occurring in our children's ministry and our youth ministry.

You've heard the numbers...

On any given Sunday morning, there might be 50 kids in the nursery. Those used to be Christmas Eve numbers. It's now a 20th Sunday after Pentecost number!

With up to 150 attending It's Elementary on Wednesdays, with 150 teenagers at WPCYG on Sunday evenings, God is giving us an incredible gift!

The opportunity to teach the next generation about God.
Not the mean god or the vengeful god that they might hear about out there.

But the God of grace and love,
the God of open minds open hearts
the God of Jesus Christ, who will stay will them...
for the rest of their lives.

That's the God we get to teach our kids about right here!

In addition to all that, we want to keep being generous with our Witness & Service partners.

To take just one example...this past week, I was privileged to be able to hear from some of our neighbors who have been helped by Soteria, one of our mission partners.

One of the speakers mentioned how she had been invited to come to the Soteria house for women. You remember how you helped to purchase that house for Soteria a few years ago?

Do you know what the speaker talked about?

She talked about how her life had been plagued by addiction.
The loss of family. The loss of friends.

She went to prison. She had no hope.

When she was released from prison, she heard about Soteria.
She went to the women's house.

Giving her a new future. New possibility.
New chance to be a different kind of parent to her son.

All that is now OPEN for her...

Friends, that is what your pledge is all about.
Not just about what each of us can do for this church.
It's about what God promises to do through each of us, in ways that we will never see or have a clue...

All this growth, in an age when mainline churches aren't growing.
All these kids, with baptisms almost every Sunday.
All the people that your pledge—by the grace of God—touches in some way, that God uses your gift to help them in some way....

Do you know what all that is called?
A miracle.

Before anything else, getting open is always a miracle of God.

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That's our stewardship message this year...but one more thing.

Anyone here have their phone with them?
Do you have a timer on your phone?
I want you to time this prayer:

I'm going to say a prayer.

I'd like someone to time it.

"Dear God, open me up. Amen."

How long did that take?
Two seconds?
At the most, five seconds?

Do you have five seconds every day, that you could give to God to say that prayer?

"God, open me up."

What would happen if you prayed that prayer every day...not just between now and Commitment Sunday, but every day for the remainder of this year?

How about every day...for the rest of your life?

Do you think God would open something new in your life?
Do you think God would work a miracle in your life?

Five seconds a day.
That's all it takes to find out.

Amen.