

LOCKED IN A ROOM WITH OPEN DOORS

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“Look, I have set before you an open door ...” Rev. 3:8a

One of the great classics of Psychoanalytic theory was Hans Sachs’ book, *Masks of Love and Life*.¹ You won’t find it at *Barnes and Noble* because it has long been out of print. But one of its chapters has a fascinating title: “Locked in a Room with Open Doors.”

Its opening paragraph gives an idea of the chapter’s substance. Sachs writes: “In a family of my acquaintance were two brothers, the younger of whom had a dread of open doors. The older one became impatient, as older brothers will be, and, wanting to break him of this habit, he threatened: ‘One day I will lock you up in a room with all the doors open.’”²

Locked in a room with all the doors open: what an image those words conjure up!

Heaven only knows how many people in this world are locked into their unhappy circumstances by *closed* doors of poverty or prejudice, of disability or disadvantage, of political, economic or gender repression.

But even when the doors are all open on the outside, doors may still remain shut on our inside, that keep us from walking out into God’s most splendid purposes for our lives.

When we are locked in a room with open doors, what is it that *keeps* us locked in? This first of all:

Fear. Fear of the unknown.

Human beings have always feared the unknown. Look at medieval maps of the world never yet explored, and you will see images of frightful dragons. It was only when explorers finally pressed out beyond the known boundaries, that they discovered there were no dragons. They discovered something else instead: exotic new lands. Their whole world was changed.

You cannot sail the high seas if you are unwilling to leave the safety of the shore. You cannot have the fruit of God in your life unless you get out on a limb where the fruit is. You cannot discover new lands unless you risk the dragons and venture out into that fearful unknown.

“He is not worthy of the honeycomb,” said Shakespeare, “who shuns the hive because the bees have stings.”

Fear of the unknown can lock us into a room of open doors.

Here’s something else that can do it: **Fear of failure.**

Susan is a young elementary school teacher who won’t be left alone by the dream of leaving her secure teaching career to go back to school to train as an architect. Her application has been accepted by a prestigious school, but her dad doesn’t think she should take the risk. He lectures her: “Look: you’ve got a good paying job and tenure and future. Why risk it all on something you might not even be able to attain?” Susan wants to take the leap but every time she thinks of acting, she hears her father’s voice in her

¹ Hans, Sachs, *Masks of Love and Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Science-Art Publishers, 1948).

² *Ibid*, p. 148

head. “What if I can’t make the grade?” she muses. “What if I fail and make a fool of myself in front of my parents and friends?”

How many of us are paralyzed by this fear: The fear of failure, the fear of falling short of someone else’s expectations, the fear of appearing foolish, of turning up empty handed for all our efforts, the fear that if we should try, we might fail, as if failure were the world’s most shameful consequence. **“It is not the things we fail at that shame us; it’s the things we should have done, and could have done, and never even tried.”**

As hockey great Wayne Gretzky once said it: “You miss 100% of the shots you never take.”

Are you locked in a room with open doors by the fear of failure? Are you holding up action until you have found all assurance that you will succeed? Then you will never move forward. You can’t steal second base and keep one foot on first.

Now here’s something else that can:

Fear of the old pain

Mark Twain said: “A cat that jumps on a hot stove will never jump on a hot stove again ... or a cold one.” It’s true, isn’t it?

We’ve been hurt. We’ve been wounded. We’ve been disappointed. And so we say to ourselves:

“I’ll never risk again.”

“I’ll never trust again.”

“I’ll never hope again.”

Fears that an old pain will return: Such fears keep us from trusting again, keep us from getting close again. Such fears wall us around with protective cynicism, keep us lonely, cooped up within ourselves, afraid of being hurt, afraid to venture. “What other dungeon is so dark as one’s own heart!” wrote Nathanael Hawthorne. “What jailor so inexorable as oneself!”

Old pains that remain hidden, old pains that go unnamed, un-confessed, un-forgiven, un-healed can hold us prisoner within ourselves even when the doors of healing and advancement and opportunity all stand wide open. Here’s something else that can lock us in when the doors stand open:

Fear of the impossible.

It’s an interesting word, *impossible*; one that we brandish a bit too hastily and revere a bit too quickly. After all, what was impossible a hundred years ago, or even ten years ago, is no longer impossible today. In fact, as one person put it, we live in a day when those who are saying “it can’t be done,” are often interrupted by those who are doing it.

“I have learned,” said rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, “to use the word *impossible* with the greatest caution.”

If there’s any agency in the world that *should* use caution with that word, it is the household of God, for as the angel said to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

Yet how often we who worship this God of the impossible, live as if it were only our own limited capabilities we trusted. How often we who serve this God of the impossible respond to challenges and opportunities as if our own resources were all we had to work with!

Here, for instance, are the children of Israel camping at an Oasis called Kadesh just south of the land that God has promised to give them. Twelve scouts, one from each

of the tribes, are sent ahead to scope it out and report back. After forty days, the twelve return with a unanimously glowing report about what they've seen. "Truly it is a land flowing with milk and honey." All twelve scouts agree on that. But from here their consensus disintegrates! Two of the scouts, Joshua and Caleb, are full of confidence that because it is God calling, God will give them the land. The other ten offer a quite different perspective: "Sure it's the land of dreams," they say, "but the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified up to heaven; and on top of that, we saw there are giants in the land. We are like grasshoppers in comparison!"

Twelve people all see the same landscape but draw utterly different conclusions about what they see. Do you see the crucial difference? Ten measure the challenge in the light of their own grasshopper self image and say, "*We can't* because the challenges are bigger are to great." Two measure the challenge in the light of God's limitless power and say, "*We can* because God is with us."

I don't know what challenges you face today: how big the obstacles, how tall the giants that lurk in the land of God's dreams for your life. But I do know this: the first question is never "Can *we* do it? Is it possible?" No, the first question must be "Is God *calling* us to do it?" For if God is calling us to do a thing, then nothing is impossible for God."

Look all through Scripture and you will see a God specializes in the impossible. Do you believe it? Do you really?

Locked in a room with open doors. Perhaps that describes some situation in your life as you step out into the coming year of 2009. Remember that the God who goes with you is the God of the impossible! Remember when the fears come up to taunt you, when the giants of the land rise up to threaten you and you get that grasshopper feeling, that it is God that steps with you.

"Look," says Jesus, "I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut."

"Surely," he says, "I will be with you to the end of time."