

HE OPENED THEIR MINDS

Most of us know a person or two who—how to I put this gently—they're far from open-minded. You know the kind of people I'm talking about, right? They immediately, and sometimes very strongly, reject different perspectives. They don't even consider any new ideas. They won't be a part of a conversation about certain issues because they know what they believe and they believe what they say and there's nothing more to say. And they just can't admit that an opinion different from theirs might contain the smallest measure of truth.

In other words, closed-minded.

A lot of people believe churches—and the Christians who belong to those churches—are closed-minded. And there's some truth to that, I think. But it's also unfair to put all Christian churches under that same umbrella, because open-minded churches do exist. For example, the Congregational denomination we belong to embraces a wide range of opinions on theological, moral and ethical matters. The only thing we ask of people who want to belong to our church is to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, God's messiah, the one who came from God to reveal God's self to the world and to save human beings from sin and death.

There's no elaborate confession of faith to make or lengthy religious instruction to go through. There are no creeds, rules, doctrines or specific theological beliefs to abide by. The thing we have in common, and the glue that holds us together, is simply our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Other than that, we have a lot of freedom to think and reflect and express and live out our faith in a wide variety of ways.

Of course, the freedom and autonomy we enjoy in our denomination doesn't necessarily make us open-minded. Some, years ago, someone came up with a "catchphrase" to encourage Christians to be open-minded. Maybe you're familiar with it: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love." Again, that leaves room for lots of different beliefs and opinions to flourish in the minds of different people who belong to the same church.

Of course, we all know that one person's non-essential is another person's absolute. And as a result, we still end up being divided again and again

and again over issues that some feel are indispensable and others believe are unnecessary.

Because we embrace the notion that in non-essential matters there should be freedom of opinion within the Body of Christ, we can find a wide range of views about various moral, ethical, social and theological issues—even here in our congregation. Abortion? Acceptable wars? Gun control? The death penalty? Climate change? Sexuality? Immigration? Racial justice. Cultural diversity?

Pick your poison. There are a variety of views and beliefs among us, and oftentimes they're very strong, passionate, heart-felt views and beliefs. Sometimes we get confused and make our personal opinions mandatory for everyone to accept. We think all Christians must believe certain things that we believe if they want to be a good Christian. But our personal opinions aren't supposed to be a test of faith another person has to subscribe to in order to be good Christian or a member in good standing of a faith community.

I think we can be faithful Christians and good church members while still being an open-minded community. We can respect differences of personal opinion, and perhaps even encourage and embrace those differences and learn from them, even as we love and serve God. In this extremely partisan world, where people have been splintered into smaller and smaller factions based on their beliefs, and disagreements have so deeply divided people, I think it's good when the church tries to do the exact opposite.

It's good to build a faith community where its members aren't required to agree on non-essential issues. It's a positive thing—and dare I say it's a very Christian thing—to be a family of God's people where there's tolerance and openness toward others who think differently, believe differently, and are different. Are we able to do that? I guess the jury's still out. But even so, I think it's a good thing—and the right thing to do—for Christians and faith communities to strive to be open-minded; to worship with each other and serve God together despite any minor differences, as we just agree to disagree. After all, Jesus himself did that.

But there's another kind of open-mindedness that this church, every Christian church, and every member of the Body of Christ needs to have. I'm not talking about the open-mindedness of tolerating different opinions. I'm talking about the kind of open-mindedness Luke describes when writing about that first Easter evening: openness to resurrection and God's power to overcome death.

Let me put today's Gospel reading in context. A group of women went to Jesus' tomb early in the morning and encountered two men in dazzling clothes

who said Jesus wasn't there, he had risen. The women rushed to the disciples and told them what they had seen and heard. But the disciples didn't embrace resurrection faith. What the women said seemed to them a foolish tale, and they didn't believe it.

Then, two followers encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, but they didn't recognize him. They talked with Jesus, had a rather lengthy conversation with him, and asked him if he was aware of the events of the last few days; but they still didn't know it was Jesus. It wasn't until they sat around the dinner table and Jesus broke bread with them that their eyes were finally opened and they recognized who their traveling companion was. Those two disciples returned to Jerusalem and told about their encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. And as they were talking, the risen Christ appeared to them. This was three days after Jesus was crucified. He was right there in their midst.

"Peace be with you," Jesus said to them. They were startled, terrified. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus had to reassure them. Look at my hands and my feet, he said. Touch me. I'm real." But still at least some of them didn't believe.

What was it, I wonder, that kept their minds closed? Was it fear? Stress? Confused minds? A lack of faith? All of the above? It's interesting that the response to the risen Christ by those who knew him best and loved him the most wasn't faith. It wasn't belief. It wasn't joy or awe or wonder. It was fear. It was terror. It was confusion and disbelief. The disciples had no idea what was going on. They didn't know what to believe, so they didn't believe at all. They had closed their minds to resurrection. But then, Luke said, Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."

What did Luke mean by that?

I suspect that the risen Christ talked to them and was opening their minds to the surprising, unbelievable fact that suffering and resurrection was the way God chose to redeem and save the world, and forgiveness of sins and eternal life needed to be proclaimed to the whole world in his name. Through them.

When I read this passage from Luke's Gospel, a question came to my mind. Why would Jesus' disciples, who had spent the last three years listening to him preach and teach in the region of Galilee, who watched him heal the sick, drive demons out of the possessed, cleanse lepers, bring to life people who were as good as dead, and who had found the courage to follow him to Jerusalem where he would almost certainly die, why would they need to have their minds opened? Why weren't their minds already open; or, if not, why weren't their minds easier to open?

I think the disciples were suffering from the kind of closed-mindedness

that says something can't be true unless I can understand it; something can't be real unless I see it or touch it; something can't be important unless I want it or think it's indispensable to me. That kind of closed-mind stems from having too little faith, too little hope, too little vision, too little love. You see, closed minds don't have any room for resurrection. It's a lot easier for us and for the church to be open-minded when it comes to non-essential ideas and opinions. Did Jesus have blue eyes or brown eyes? Should the carpet in the church office be red or blue or brown? In the whole scheme of things, do any of those things really matter?

But a more important matter is this: are we open-minded in other, much more important ways? Are we open-minded in ways that matter to us as Christians and as the Body of Christ? Are our minds open to the presence, activity and purposes of God today? Do we see and trust that God is at work in moments of great sacrifice, extraordinary self-giving, and yes, even in moments of suffering and seeming defeat? Are we open-minded enough to believe that the power of God is life, and that ultimately, God's divine, life-giving, life-sustaining power will prevail over death? Can we hear God's persistent invitation to live faithfully, live righteously, and live justly as Christians and as a church, in a world that is at times far from faithful, righteous and just?

Jesus' disciples found themselves in the presence of the risen Christ, but they couldn't or wouldn't believe it because it seems they weren't open-minded enough to believe that God's love is stronger than death, and in the end it will prevail. But what about us? Are our minds open to that?

I think our church community is open-minded in the sense that, if we choose to, we can accept one another and tolerate our differences of opinion. But what I wonder is, are we open-minded enough to recognize the presence of the risen Christ when he appears to us in various ways, shapes and forms? Are we open-minded enough to live our lives as though the goodness and love of God is actually real and has overcome the grave?

My friends, Easter is about seeing God, seeing life, seeing the world, seeing other people, seeing everything in a whole new way. Everything. When the risen Christ came to his disciples, he opened their minds so they might recognize him, believe he lived, was present with them, and would be with them always, to the end of the age.

Maybe the risen Christ will do that for us, as well.

If we keep an open mind about it. Amen.