

How Open Is Open?

Series: Discipleship with Integrity; Acts 10: 44-48

The poem *Outwitted* by Edwin Markham:

“They drew a circle that shut me out
heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took them in.”

How far are we to take this? How free is free? How welcoming is welcoming? How open is open? How far can we go to be as free, as welcoming, and as open as the God revealed to us by Jesus? How much openness and freedom can we embrace? How far do we have to go to match the freedom, the welcoming, and the openness God shows us?

What are the limits to inclusion? The Apostle Peter was running up against these same questions about freedom, welcoming, and openness – the same questions we’re asking this morning – in the story from Acts, chapter ten

As we seek to find some answers, we’ll look at freedom and try to navigate the fine line between freedom and responsibility, welcome and receptivity, and openness and accountability.

It had been a long journey already for Peter -- not just from Simon’s home near the water all the way to Caesarea in the mountains. Peter traveled light years since that noon hour when he went up on Simon’s rooftop to pray. He had a vision of God offering him a banquet of non-kosher food to eat. Peter refused because he was a good Jew. God responded that Peter should not consider anything unacceptable that God makes acceptable.

As Peter was pondering the vision, the visitors showed up at Simon’s house, sent by a Roman centurion named Cornelius. They were asking Peter to go with them to Cornelius’ home. Peter went with them even though Cornelius was a Gentile. Arriving, Peter discovered Cornelius had also had a vision and that Peter’s mission was to tell this Gentile household about Jesus. He did and they all experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Peter then realized something new to him: (v. 34) “God shows no partiality”. The implication was that Peter was actually powerless to withhold acceptance in the form of baptism from these Gentiles whom God had made acceptable. The meaning of the story is that Peter began learning how open God really was. You and I rediscover this truth when we realize that there are no limits on who is acceptable to God: no racial or religious restrictions to get into the kingdom of God. It’s fully open, fully welcoming, and fully free.

What does it mean to be open, for instance, when it comes to worship? Freedom means to worship as it is meaningful to you, led by the Spirit and participating as part of the community of faith. What are the limits to our freedom? Is it really freedom if there are limits?

What does it mean to be open and free in community structure, organization, and governance? We organize ourselves here at Crossroads for the purpose of perceiving the Spirit among us. We encourage the vision and passion of individuals and small groups. The vision and passion often exists in some tension with consensus and the focus needed for congregational action and following the Spirit. What are the limits to our freedom? Is it really freedom if there are limits?

And now, a more difficult question. What does it mean to be open and free in belief? Does it mean that no theological questions are outside the lines, even when they question traditional creeds and doctrinal formulations? How much freedom is essential for the purpose of seeking truth on the journey, for discerning God’s call for our lives, and becoming Christ-like? What if the questions seem to place us in conflict with our initial commitment and the things we

believed at our initial faith commitment? What are the limits to questioning and exploring in matters of theology?

We cannot become stagnant. We need to live the questions and become like Jesus who was always drawing the circle larger. We need to become like Jesus who was always pushing the journey deeper.

God is fully open to us. We need to be fully open to God and to each other. This does not mean no boundaries in God's new creation. What it does mean is that we don't get to set those boundaries except our own when it comes to our own desire and willingness to enter, and be part of, God's new creation. And God's boundaries are not ours.

Jesus and his followers turned everything people knew about God upside down, or maybe right side up. This is the Christ Peter followed. We follow the Christ who revealed God's unconditional acceptance for us and for all people. Crossroads is called to be a place, a community, that embraces people where they are, including us, as we are, fully open to everyone, to each one, who comes here.

The vision I see for Crossroads Church is to be a congregation faithful to that image of God seen by the Apostle Peter in the face of Cornelius the Gentile. I envision this congregation living faithfully in service to that image of God seen by the Apostle Paul when he proclaimed that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female. We're all one in Christ.

We are free, but this is not the freedom of license to do just what we want just because we feel like it, regardless of the consequences. In our freedom, we count on our community to hold us accountable in love because of our commitment in love to God and to each other. Accountability in our freedom is absolutely crucial to discern the Spirit's movement among us and to enable us to grow as individuals and as a community. Deciding who belongs to God, who is acceptable and who is not, is not something we get to do.

Openness means trusting the Spirit's movement in each other. That's harder to do than it sounds. For example, right now we are in the process of receiving financial pledges for the coming fiscal year. We're dealing with budgets and money as part of the covenant we have with each other and with God in this community of faith.

In church life, we tend to call our decisions about how much money to give *stewardship*. This is an old term for a manager or caretaker who works on behalf of an owner. Each of us is a steward of the spiritual, physical, and relational resources entrusted to us by God.

Financial resources may be the hardest to entrust to others. The Business and Finance committee are stewards of our communal money. Did you receive a pledge card this past week? This pledge is more than the commitment of how much money you plan to give to this church this coming year. It is an opportunity and a challenge to consider how you will use all your financial resources, all your resources. Such decisions reflect the priorities we hold and the values we profess

How we use money, and really all our resources, ultimately mirrors our spiritual journey. Responding to God's call, when it's an authentic response, involves all of ourselves -- all we have and all we do. This might not happen right away, but it will inevitably if our journey has integrity

I hope you're not disappointed that this is not a sermon on *The DaVinci Code*. With the new movie out based on the best selling book, it's getting lots of play these days. Lots of churches are advertising sermons on *The DaVinci Code*. I have to tell you, it's not happening for me.

There actually is one thing about the *DaVinci Code* phenomenon that relates to the theme of this sermon, the theme of Peter's story, and the idea of being open, welcoming, and free. When asked what the popularity of *The DaVinci Code* says about images of Christianity in our popular culture, evangelical pastor and author Brian McClaren wrote these words on the web site of the *Sojourners* organization:

I think a lot of people have read the book, not just as a popular page-turner but also as an experience in shared frustration with status-quo, male-dominated, power-oriented, cover-up-prone organized Christian religion. We need to ask ourselves why the vision of Jesus hinted at in Dan Brown's book is more interesting, attractive, and intriguing to these people than the standard vision of Jesus they hear about in church. . . . Is it possible that, even though Brown's fictional version misleads in many ways, it at least serves to open up the possibility that the church's conventional version of Jesus may not do him justice?

Christ calls us to draw the circle bigger, more inclusive, and taking in the whole world. Christ calls us to push our understanding deeper and deeper to reflect the God revealed in Jesus. I pray that the image of Jesus people hear about in this place, that people witness in this community, and that people encounter at Crossroads will do him justice.