

Message: "How To Open Minds"

Scripture: Luke 24:36b-48

(¹³Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²²Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." ²⁵Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. ³²They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.)

³⁶While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Once upon a time, there was an old and wise fish swimming deep in the ocean. As he swam along, he met two younger fish swimming in the opposite direction; their paths crossed. The older fish nodded his head politely, acknowledging the approaching youngsters, and they did the same. The old, wise fish then said to them, "Good day, young ones. How's the water today?" The two younger fish

looked at each other and quickly responded, "Good, yeah fine. It's good today." Both parties then continued on their way. When the two younger fish were out of range of the older fish, one turned to the other and said, "What the hell is water?"

I heard this joke on the radio this past week, and it stuck with me, for I had been reading the scripture lesson for today which finds us on the road to Emmaus; it also finds us overhearing two human fish who have no idea they are swimming in holy water, and have been doing so for some time. They weren't asking "What's water?" but "Where's God?", not realizing God was with them in the form of Jesus, both when he lived among them in his ministry, but also in his appearance in this passage after the resurrection. They didn't realize that Jesus was with them, that God was with them, until Jesus opened their closed minds to see.

Could we ever use that skill today!

You ever played the game of "name your superpower?" The game is played where players consider what superpower they wish they could embody, things like becoming invisible or flying or breathing underwater; but these days, I think I would wish for the superpower that would enable me to open closed minds, like Jesus did. For aren't there an awful lot of people in the present world who are causing all sorts of problems because their minds are closed? Closed to anything but what they choose to believe even when what they say they believe is clearly and consistently contradicted by reality?

Anyone here know someone in their life who is closed minded? How do your conversations go? Do you try to point out the inconsistencies in their opinions, sharing the obvious facts and data that are out there contradicting their point of view? Do you let them know there is absolutely no justification for the position they hold? Do you speak with profound eloquence, using golden terminology of irresistible convincing that would move the devil himself to repent? Do you create flow charts and powerpoint presentations and logic dioramas to illustrate their error? Do you bring in expert testimony and scientific professionals to tell them just how wrong they are? Do you offer them donuts if they'd be willing to just consider an alternative point of view?

How do any of these work?

My sense, and my experience, is that such efforts are wasted, if the person truly has a closed mind. Dr. Andrea Mathews, LPC, NCC, is a cognitive and transpersonal therapist who runs a blog called "The Closed Mind: Why does it close, and how does it open?" In that blog, Dr. Mathews shares thoughts about the reasons for closed-mindedness. She says, "it is fear that generally keeps the mind closed. Often the fear is based on the idea that one must be right in order to be OK. It is not safe to be wrong. Therefore, once an idea is grasped, one must hold on to it, for fear that to question it might prove one wrong and thus unsafe.....Being right at all times about all that matters is the way to feel safe."

What she is saying is that a closed-minded person is fundamentally a scared person. And the more profound the fear, the more extreme the closed mind.

No, trying to change the thinking of a person with a closed mind with carefully crafted arguments and crystal-clear reason rarely has any effect for the closed mind is often operating out of fear. But this is no reason to give up; it is, however, a reason to dramatically change tactics - and might I suggest the kind of tactics Jesus used?

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were operating out of extreme fear; their world had been turned upside down, their hopes dashed upon the rocks of crucifixion, their purpose eradicated in a single blow by the state. They were scared. And then, Jesus shows up.

He showed up, and said "Peace be with you."

He showed up, and asked them questions about their recent days.

He showed up, and listened to what the disciples had to say.

He showed up, and travelled with them to where they were staying.

He showed up, and asked them for something to eat.

He showed up, and let them examine the wounds on his hands and feet.

It was only after a whole lot of listening and walking and eating and giving evidence that Jesus began in earnest to respond to their confusion and curiosity as they began to warm to the idea that God had indeed caused the impossible to happen. It was only after Jesus paid attention to the barriers of their thinking that he was able to say things they were able to hear and understand and believe;

it was only after Jesus had stayed with them for quite some time that they felt safe enough to once again listen, understand, and believe.

What, I wonder, would change in our dealings with closed-minded persons if we treated them like Jesus treated the disciples on the road to Emmaus? What if closed-minds were understood to be a sign of someone's woundedness or insecurity? What if closed minds were understood to signify a person's attempts to cover up a deeply felt fragility which dare not be scrutinized, for they feel that to do so might destroy them? What if we saw in a closed mind a life that doesn't feel safe?

But the real question then becomes not "how can I convince them they are wrong;" the real question becomes, "how can I help them feel safe?" Let us take our cue from Jesus.

Start by offering peace - do not engage in confrontation, do not return insult for insult, hold onto the rising tide of anger or resentment or offense you may feel; offer instead patience, listening, kindness, receptivity; these are things that tend to diffuse and disarm shallow hostility, and help set the stage for more honest sharing.

Ask questions of them - but questions aimed at understanding not accusation, let them know you care about them aside from the issue at hand.

Let them talk; listen more than respond, especially when they say things you are desperate to correct. An oft-bitten tongue may be the gateway to more empathy and understanding.

Allow your thinking to be challenged as well - so often we approach a closed-minded person with the attitude that we are right and they are wrong; it may be so, indeed, but such an attitude will eventually get us into the same closed-mindedness we are wishing to challenge! None of us knows everything, and no one is 100 percent right all the time - and the humility to acknowledge this must be a constant companion.

Eat together - or, more to the point, do the kinds of things that speak of hospitality and that encourage fellowship; make the person comfortable, lessen distractions, let them know they matter enough to share what they need or even

want; do the kinds of things you would do for like-minded friends - and do them authentically. This is sort of the "love your enemy" part, but the love must be genuine to work.

Let them know you are not a threat to their safety; go where they are going, stay with them in their comfort zones, share with them what they are willing to share; let them know the importance you see in them is not dependent upon what they think, but who they are as a human being, as a child of God.

Explain your point of view only if invited; wait for their interest in you to begin to challenge their insecurity; be ready for that moment to not come for awhile, for days or weeks or months or years, maybe never, but wait nonetheless - you may not be aware of the seeds of possibility you are planting in their minds as the world continues to challenge their mindset. And if they ever reach a point where the questions would threaten to consume them, when their closed-minded worldview begins to collapse around them, who do you think they will reach out to first? Those who badgered them about their opinions, or those who cared beyond the issue?