

Open and Affirming Faith

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Mark 1:21-28

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Psalm III

How do we know when someone is a member of this church or any other organization? In some ways a church is easier to join. We have not only formal procedures for joining, but through the sacraments and the traditions we have other ways of participating as members. But what about actually feeling like a member. How does that happen?

The good people of Corinth wrestled with this question. They consulted Paul on even the formal matters. In the reading from the first letter to Corinth, Paul directs his thoughts to the issue of food dedicated to a foreign deity. He says that as long as the follower of Christ does not understand the food as having some connection to a deity, then there is no problem. But if that follower does believe the food has some divine power, they are in danger. Not only have they shared in the foreign religious practice, they have in their heart set faith in an idol, thus in opposition to God, the one who sent Christ as our hope.

Food has become a metaphor for a multiplicity of doctrines and expectations. Just as dietary laws and restrictions separate and identify groups, so also do other doctrines and practices. Care must be exercised so that the carefully crafted rules and procedures which give a community identity do not become idols themselves, having more power in a person's heart than their faith in God can support. This care must be given to every dimension of life in a church. That same care must be extended even to the conferring of membership in the church.

There is a flip side to this matter. Is there a limit to being tolerant and obliging? How do we respond to the statement, "if you don't stand for anything, you will fall for anything"? For what, or more especially, for whom will we stand? With whom will we stand? Is there a set of rules or a collection of oral or anecdotal codes to which members must conform in order to actually be a part of this church? These are the questions with which we are wrestling in our Open and Affirming discussions.

There may be some concern about another sermon on homosexuality. I believe the matter extends well beyond that single issue, and I do not want to diffuse those discrete discussions. But I do think we ought to give some thought to the larger implications of saying we are Open and Affirming. Specifically Open and Affirming has been designated as the phrase used to show we have taken a stand along the same historic lines as that taken in opposition to slavery, in support of civil rights and the equality of men and women. But it can mean we are also open to anyone who has been placed outside the usual religious community.

The gospel compiler, Mark, had an interesting take on this whole matter. He begins the story of Jesus with three unique tales of affirmation. The first is Jesus' baptism. In this story the voice is heard by everyone when it says, "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased". The second story, read last week, is the call to the fishers on Galilee. Their affirmation is indicated by the very act of following Jesus. To be a disciple means, literally, to follow in another's footsteps. The third affirmation of Jesus comes from no less than an evil spirit, who calls out, "I know who you are—the Holy One of God." Jesus did not wait for either the established religious community or the disaffected people to approach him about taking a leadership role. His unique place in society, history and theology was affirmed by those people who had nothing to do with religion. He was recognized by people outside the faith, as it was practiced then.

As a denomination we have affirmed over and over that faith in Jesus is sufficient for membership. That was one of the bedrocks of the Christian Church from which the United Church of Christ was formed. Another bedrock was the belief that God had yet more light to break through this community, to paraphrase the words of Pastor Robinson as he sent the Pilgrims, our congregational ancestors, off from Holland to the New World. Our heritage as a denomination is to open doors no other group would open, to affirm lives and strengths and faith no one else would affirm. Making the affirmation that we are Open and Affirming is to do more than simply welcome people who have been set in the margins of the religious communities. It is to own again our place in the continuing heritage which has welcomed slaves and free blacks, Sioux and Hawaiian, Armenian and Hungarian, women, and any one else who has been ignored, chastised or oppressed by religious communities. Our affirmation becomes our confession of faith in God, our confession of hope in Christ, our confession of partnership with God's Spirit. To be an open community is to confess we are also open to the possibilities and opportunities and challenges which God makes present for us every day and for every generation. Each of these historic affirmations has been difficult. But each has been in anticipation of opening society to greater diversity. Creation, as God has given it to us, as it has

continued to evolve, rewards diversity. Closing off diversity can become like closing off God's gift, God's grace, God's forgiveness in Christ.

Rather than honoring some archaic culinary or affectional code, we are called to reveal our faith. This would help us be more powerful than the doctrinal idols which have kept good and faithful people outside of religious communities, whoever those people may be. We are challenged to call out the demons which overwhelm and consume people with hatred. And we are given the opportunity to welcome all people. This means formally through the sacraments and practices, as well as informally at coffee and in the wider community. Doctrine and dogma, when well practiced, keep a person or a community so balanced they seem stationary. However, when shaken they topple easily. Faith results in creative unbalance which moves people in unexpected directions. Shaking simply makes the motion a journey more exciting. By accepting Jesus' call to faith, we travel in the company of more outcasts than can be named. I cannot think of more honorable companions, than those who reach out for God's grace, rather than those who try to hold it close to their chest. As we travel with our ancestors in open and affirming faith we will make clear the path for our descendants that they may later continue to embrace God's grace.