

“Open Minds Open Hearts”  
Acts 11:1-18  
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 21, 2022  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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Before I came to Westminster, in the spring of 2018 when I interviewed with the PNC, I have a vivid memory of that committee telling me that Westminster is a congregation of Open Minds Open Hearts.

It was one of the reasons that I felt a call to come here.

It was a vision for our church that I could easily embrace, and, just as I believed it 4 years ago, so do I believe it even more strongly now—Open Minds Open Hearts is a vision that will lead us into our future together, into becoming the church that God wants us to be.

Now what does that mean?  
Open Minds Open Hearts?

Here’s some of what it means to me.

It means we strive to be inclusive with everyone, practicing radical hospitality toward all children of God.

It means that race and class and sexual orientation and gender identity and political persuasion have no business determining who will be a part of this church or a leader in this church or listened to in this church.

We will rely on the Holy Spirit as it leads people to us, and as it leads us to listen to other people.

That’s what being open means.

Open Minds Open Hearts means we don't get to put up barriers to the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

It means we are generous with our words as well as our wallets.

It means we seek to do justice both within these walls and outside these church walls.

It means that we will follow the imagination of God, the mind of God, the call of God...and do it with joy, open to whatever ways the Holy Spirit will lead us into the future.

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Now...all of what I just said is part of how I answer the question of who we are, what Open Minds Open Hearts means to me.

But what does that mean for us, as a community of faith, right now?

In other words, this coming year, who is God calling us to be?  
Three words I want you to remember this year.

Connect.

Serve.

Grow.

Those are our goals for this year.

I've shared them with our staff.

I've shared them with our Session.

Can you remember those three goals this year?

You're going to hear a sermon on each of these goals later in the sermon series, but I want to say a few words about them right now. For example, let's start with the last one:

GROW.

Do you know how many youth and adult chaperones are on the youth retreat this weekend? 130!

Do you know how many kids we have signed up for It's Elementary? 150!

Do you know how many babies and toddlers we had in the nursery last Sunday? 43!

We are a growing church.

Now numbers like that can be exciting, especially when many mainline churches are not growing these days.

And they are exciting.

They give life and energy to the church.

At the same time, we have to be prepared to support that life, that energy, that growth.

Let me get very specific:

When it comes to growth, we need to start expanding the number of positions on our church staff.

We have a wonderful staff here at Westminster, and when it comes to our pastoral staff, we've got plenty of pastors on hand! With four associate pastors, and a parish associate—splendid colleagues of mine—we are well-positioned when it comes to clergy.

When I say “grow our staff,” I'm talking about the managerial level staff. I'm talking about growing the number of administrative staff. I'm talking about the positions that people don't see leading worship on Sunday mornings, but are essential to the daily operations of our church.

Expanding that infrastructure is critical if our church is going to be equipped and prepared for growth!

You see, one of the biggest challenges for a church like ours is not so much getting people to visit our church, or even to join our church. You've seen the new member classes that we have around here!

What's challenging is when those new members are no longer new members. Maybe they've been here a few years, and they're still trying to develop the friendships that will keep them, and sustain them here. Maybe they were easily engaged when their children were a part of our children's ministry and our youth ministry and now it's 8, 9, 10 years later...their kids are out of the house. How do those parents plug in to Westminster in a new way?

In other words, growth isn't just about numbers.  
It's also about ENGAGEMENT.

How do we keep our members engaged in our church, deepening their ties with other members of our church, participating in our ministries and growing in their own lives of faith?

Engagement—that's essential to my vision for Westminster.  
It goes hand in hand with growth.

Please don't misunderstand, it's not like we don't have engagement here at Westminster! I'm always ASTOUNDED at the number of people who volunteer to help around here. Just consider all the people who helped with Rise Against Hunger yesterday—350!

But if we're going to keep growing, if our new members are going to become engaged members, we have to have the staff to sustain our growth, so that everyone's gifts can be used faithfully around here, and spiritual growth can flourish around here.

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Speaking of spiritual growth, that's what our text for today is all about.

It's about God's vision for the early church to grow.

In our text for today, Peter is explaining what happened to him with Cornelius in chapter 10. Jewish law forbade Peter from eating particular foods—food that Gentiles would eat—and that prohibition is carried over into associating with Gentiles. In other words, the early church in Peter's mind was not intended for Gentiles—it was for the people of Israel only.

But then he has a vision, and in the vision, he's told to eat food that he once considered unclean. Peter refuses once, and he refuses twice—(I hope you caught that part, Peter's RESISTANCE to opening his mind)—but the voice in the vision insists:

“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

So he goes to visit Cornelius—not just a Gentile, but a Roman centurion! A soldier in “the enemy's” army! And the Holy Spirit is poured out on Cornelius and his family, which opens the door to Gentiles in God's church.

In other words, today's text is about the early church GETTING OPEN!

Not because the CHURCH wanted things that way...but because God wanted things that way.

Which is how getting open works.

We are church of Open Minds and Open Hearts.  
Can I get an “Amen” to that?

And we would like to think that we can open our own minds.  
I would like to think that I can open my own heart.

But according to Scripture, that’s not how it works.  
Whenever our minds and hearts are opened...it’s an act of God.

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For example, do you remember our first passage today?  
The story of Abraham and Sarah receiving those three mysterious  
visitors...and one of them says that Sarah will have a son.

How does Sarah respond?  
She laughs!  
Her heart and her mind are closed—very reasonably, very  
rationally closed—to any such possibility.

But let’s not be too hard on Sarah.  
Do you remember how Abraham responded to this news in chapter  
17, when God told him the same thing?

He fell on his face and laughed!

In other words, the Bible is replete with faithful followers having  
minds that are closed, hearts that are closed—whether it’s Abraham or  
Sarah or Peter or the early church...and God takes great pleasure in  
getting minds and hearts open again!

So...what does all that mean for us here at Westminster?  
I think it means this.

Whenever we talk about our vision, whenever we describe our goals for this year, whenever we tell our story, it must be a story that begins with God.

A story about God's goodness.

A story about God's grace.

A story about how God has saved us and planted each us right here, right now, to do God's work in this world.

Which is why I believe that the second goal for this year is so important—do you remember what it is?

Serve.

That's how we tell God's story.

Not through success. But through service.

That's how other people will see God in this church.

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In a recent podcast, Malcolm Gladwell described how, in the late 1970s, his parents got together with other church members to welcome Vietnamese refugees into their Canadian town.

The way his parents and their church community connected with those refugees, helping them integrate into Canadian society—it made a difference—not just in the lives of those refugees, but in the lives of Malcolm Gladwell and his siblings.

So 40+ years later, Malcolm Gladwell interviewed his brother, Geoffrey.

Geoffrey spent his career as an elementary school principal. A good number of refugees live in the town that school served, and their children attended his elementary school.

One year, of those refugee families was from Syria, and they had a little girl.

She's a kindergartener, it's the first day of school.  
New land, new home.  
She left a country filled with trauma and violence.  
And she is INCONSOLABLE.  
She's wailing, just wailing...in the classroom.

Usually, Geoffrey says, the teacher and the staff will tell the parents that they'll look after their child, and in 5 minutes or so, the child will have calmed down and all is ok.

Only that's not what happened this time.

This little girl is just crying and crying in the most heart-wrenching way.

So Geoffrey Gladwell—he doesn't know what to do, so he approaches the ESL teacher, Tracy, and tells Tracy to just hold this girl. And Tracy puts the girl on her lap, and she holds her there.

And he goes up to the little girl, and Geoffrey Gladwell kneels down in front her, and he starts to HUM...

Hmmmm, hmmm.  
Hmmmm, hmmm.

Don't pay attention to my humming, that's poor humming.  
But Geoffrey Gladwell—he hummed in a way that he hoped that little girl might understand.

A UNIVERSAL LULLABY—that’s what he hummed.

And you know what that girl did?

She stopped wailing.

She stopped crying.

She got off the teacher’s lap, she took her elementary school principal’s hand, and for the next hour, she REFUSED to let go.

She had a DEATH GRIP on his finger as they walked around the school!

They sat in the conference room, drawing pictures, talking to one another—of course, she didn’t know English, so neither of them understood a word that the other was saying, but they kept talking and drawing...

After an hour and a half, she was back in her classroom.

And she wasn’t crying anymore.

The next day, this little girl came into the classroom—like she was ready to take on the world!

Every time her principal came down to that end of the building, every time Geoffrey Gladwell walked into the classroom, she would launch herself across the classroom and give Geoffrey Gladwell a hug.

Geoffrey Gladwell said:

“Working with that child, what can happen when you show love and support and kindness to someone—that was the pinnacle of my career,” he said.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/revisionist-history/i-was-a-stranger-and-you-welcomed-me>

Do you remember the first goal I mentioned for this year?  
I know, here we are 20 minutes into the sermon, and I'm asking  
you to recall what I said in the first 2 minutes.

Do you remember the first goal for this year?  
Connect.

It's what Geoffrey Gladwell did with that girl from Syria.  
It's what that little girl did with him.

They created a new connection.  
It's what God is asking all of us to do here at Westminster.

Coming out of the pandemic, I believe that our **FIRST PRIORITY**  
is to create and build new connections this year.

Can you do that?  
If you're wondering how, just read the Harbinger announcements.

I submit to you that when you and I make new connections,  
OUR minds and hearts will be opened by God—  
and we will be like Abraham and Sarah and Peter—  
delighted, dumbfounded,  
astonished by God's grace...

Amen.