

Opening Doors, Getting Fed
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
April 22, 2012
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 24:36b-48, Acts 11: 1-18

We are now just a few weeks into the second century of the life of this church. If Caldwell church were ever to adopt an official crest or a coat of arms for its second century – one with meaningful symbols that reflect life here - I would propose that those symbols be a set of doors and food.

The food part hardly needs explanation. We like to eat here. Food brings us together just as it did with so many different groups in scripture and it still does around the world. Food has powerful effects - to relax us, to take our minds off what separates us, to set the scene for conversation, fellowship and understanding.

As for the item of food that might go on that coat of arms for Caldwell, it might be a golden-brown, crispy-edged piece of cod from the annual fish fry. Or the eggs, sausage and grits we serve our neighbors at Caldwell House every Sunday. Or it might be Magic Mike Watson's barbecue, for, wherever two are gathered in Christ's name, Mike will cook barbecue.

A set of doors would also seem fitting as a symbol of the ethos of this place. Our beloved Jimmy Todd built the front doors of this church by hand and dedicated them to his sister. A half-century later, it was Jimmy and the others in that old Caldwell remnant who flung those doors open. It wasn't just that they opened the doors. It was the gracious welcome they extended to all the different kinds of people who came through them that made the difference. Thanks be to God.

Members Brenda Campbell and Tom Bohr have begun painstakingly restoring our old doors by hand. The main sanctuary doors look like new. Brenda explained to me just last week that the process of cleaning and stripping the doors not only removes decades of dried, dead wood. It also unlocks new life and vigor in the wood and lets it breathe again. That sounded like a pretty good metaphor for Caldwell all by itself. All of that is to say that our doors mean a lot here. They symbolize the radical hospitality you show all of God's children and they get lots of use – both literally and figuratively.

Our two scripture readings this morning bring us stories about food and about doors. But they are about much more. They are about how we invite others into the community

of faith, especially others who are different from us in some way. They are about breaking norms. They are about the promise we have in the Risen Christ and how that promise can help us overcome fears and take risks in Christ's name.

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The story we heard from the Gospel of Luke is one of many resurrection stories. The scene is set behind locked doors, where the disciples were holed up. It was a reasonable precaution. Jesus' body was missing. There had been claims of Jesus appearing to others at the tomb and along the roadside. Then, in Luke, Jesus appears and breaks bread with the disciples.

They needed time to sort things out. They also needed to avoid those who had opposed Jesus and who might see them now as a threat. So they gathered in a room and locked the doors. Then, just like that, Jesus was there.

"Yes, it's really me," he said. "Look at my pierced hands and feet. Touch me. I'm not a ghost. Really."

Jesus could see his closest followers were still befuddled. What could he do to get them to believe? He asked for something to eat. What an odd thing to do! Jesus might have been hungry, I suppose. But I don't think that's what he was up to. He wanted to show them it was him in flesh and blood, fully risen, truly resurrected, having walked right out of the tomb. He didn't want to leave anything to doubt – lest the facts get twisted around. So he ate a piece of fish, as, no doubt, the apostles had seen him do countless times over their three years together.

But, in a sense, it was the disciples who were fed and strengthened in that moment. They were fortified and awakened to snap out of their fear and doubt. They were given the courage to open those locked doors, go out into the world despite the risks and proclaim the good news to Jew and gentile alike: Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!

How many times have we sought refuge behind closed doors? As the father a teenager and a pre-teen, I can assure you that the teen ritual of stomping up the stairs and slamming the bedroom door to get away from the parents is still alive and well. But it's not just teenagers. And it's not just literal doors we close to the outside world.

We lock the doors of our minds when confronted with new ideas that make us uncomfortable, self-conscious or threatened. We lock the doors of our hearts when we've been hurt. We may shut tight the doors of our faith when confronted with a

frightening diagnosis, unable to see our way through it. The same might go for an unexpected job change or a divorce we didn't see coming or we couldn't stop.

We close the doors of our institutions, too, when we want those who are unlike us to stay out. Lord knows, that's true for the church at large. We use the doors to keep out those we think that God loves less than us, those whom God made different than us and, thus, less deserving of our acceptance. But Jesus appears nonetheless. Closed doors don't matter to the risen Christ.

"Why are you frightened," Jesus said to his disciples that day after appearing to them in the locked room, "and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Why do we fear? Why do we doubt? We fear and we doubt because we are human, after all. But the risen Christ changes all of that. The risen Christ transforms us. The risen Christ can open closed minds and closed hearts.

The risen Christ, who has already won for us, gives us the courage to open up and take risk in his name. And sometimes, as has happened here at Caldwell, the risk pays off. Sometimes when the doors are flung open, a gracious welcome and spiritual food is extended to all who would come in, and we are the ones who are fed.

Here at Caldwell, we are nourished with the abundance of diversity that stretches us and fills us up in ways we don't anticipate. We are made rich by the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of the other and, thus, see our God more wholly.

That, friends, is what happens when you open the doors of the church with an authentic welcome. In this place, we have been fed out of the abundance of the rich diversity of who has come through those doors.

I pray, it makes us hungry for more, lest we become satisfied. Even a little hunger goes a long way. It can guide us to look around and see not just who is in the pews beside us but who is *not* in the pews beside us. I will come back to that in a moment.

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But first let's take a look at the other story we heard from scripture that might give us the second symbol for our church's fictional coat of arms, a story about food and how God can use even food to call us into a new way of walking in Christ with others.

This story occurs years after those immediate post-resurrection days when the apostles were holed up behind locked doors. At this point in Acts, the Apostle Peter has emerged

as one of the most prominent leaders among those whom detractors mockingly called Christ-ians. But Peter, like the Blues Brothers, was a man on a mission from God.

In the story we heard, Peter is under fire from the traditional Jewish authorities for making friends and converts among the gentiles, whom the traditional Jews considered unclean. In other words, they were different.

Peter tells of a dream in which God told him to take a risk by ignoring old, restrictive norms. Peter dreamed that God sent down a sheet full of food – but it wasn't kosher. God told Peter to eat, but Peter protested, citing the old Hebrew Law about what his people could and could not eat. Three times God and Peter had this debate. Peter holds out, at least for the moment.

Then three gentile men show up at Peter's door, saying they were sent by the Holy Spirit (there we are, back at the door again). Peter hears the Spirit, also, saying, "Make no distinction between them and you. Go with them."

Peter befriends these men despite their cultural differences. They find common ground in their belief in the risen Christ and they all feel bound together through the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter gives in. And, as he concludes his story in front of his critics, he makes the most important point of all.

"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

In other words, Peter says, "Who am I to stand in God's way? Who am I to put limits on the depth and the breadth of God's love? Who am I to withhold God's hospitality?"

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This story communicates the essence of the entire book of Acts, the account of how Peter, Paul, Philip and others went into the world to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations. The accounts of their courage and conviction have inspired disciples for centuries since.

This story also provided the spiritual guidance for the planning team that has been working for the last two years on our denomination's national Multicultural Church Conference, which begins this Wednesday in Charlotte. Let me say up front - I realize the session's decision, at my suggestion, to defer our worship next Sunday to the closing worship service at the conference may seem unorthodox.

“Why would we cancel worship here to go out there?” some might be asking. “We have multicultural worship here every Sunday and we love it.”

“Why get up earlier than normal and go sit in a hotel ballroom with a bunch of people we don’t even know?”

“Why risk leaving a bad impression if someone wants to come visit Caldwell that day for the first time and we aren’t here?”

“Why does John want us to do this – just because he is the one who is involved in this conference?”

Well, all of those are fair questions. Yes, it’s unusual. Yes, it takes some extra effort. Yes, we may unfortunately miss a few visitors, though we will direct them to attend our sister churches that day and come back on another Sunday. The Worship Committee and the Session have thought through as many of those details as possible and provided the best solutions they can.

So, why go? Why not just sleep in next Sunday?

Truthfully, I don’t know any details about what the conference’s closing worship this year will be like. All I do know is that some of our members have been asked to help with some African drumming. But, if it’s anything like the closing worship at the conference two years ago in Chicago, I’m sure it will be memorable, uplifting and, maybe, even transformative.

And I pray that it will make us hungry for an even more intentional multicultural walk here at Caldwell. We are truly blessed to have a more diverse church family than many churches, diversity in race and color, economic class, sexual orientation and neighborhood. At the same time, based on new member trends, we get a little “whiter” each month. Certainly there is nothing wrong with that. But our mission statement calls us forward in the other direction and our diversity requires our constant care and feeding.

Diverse churches are defined in many ways and built on many aspects of activity. Worship, as it should be, is central to that experience, the one activity that gives life to everything else we do. We might ask:

What can we do to invite more people of all races and cultures to share what we have been given? In what we have now, what do we most cherish and want to protect, such

as our gospel music tradition? How can we build on that to incorporate ways to celebrate and know God in ways that welcome others – in our music, yes, but also in our liturgy, our preaching and other aspects of our worship? I don't pretend to have the answers – but I believe God calls us to avoid complacency, which, despite our best intentions, is ever at our door, mine included.

As I wrote in this month's newsletter:

In many ways, our multicultural journey is still in its early stages. Rev. David Anderson promotes an idea he calls “gracism,” which is more than tolerance or accommodation of another way of doing things based on racial or cultural difference. It means lifting up those “different” ways. It means making gracious room for taking risk and experimentation. It means emphasizing community over individual comfort, at least individual comfort 100% of the time.

This is one of the most gracious communities of faith I've ever known ... and, in many ways, your radical welcome has grown only deeper and wider in the last few years. Who better, then, to move even more boldly into God's call to open our doors in new ways, that people of all cultures and backgrounds might be fed as we are?

As Jesus said to his disciples, “Why do you fear and why do you doubt? In me, God's love for all has come into the world. I will equip you to proclaim the good news to all nations.”

And our response might be, as Peter said to the gatekeepers of his day, “Who are we to stand in God's way?”

In the name of the God whose love for all is ever-abundant, Amen