

## More Than a Motto (Introduction to Series)

*Luke 18:9-14*

Every year, Americans are surveyed about their religious affiliation. **[slide: at top put (it should look like a survey form) in large print, Religious Affiliation. Then put a box by the following categories: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other, None]** They are asked if they are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other, or None. From 1970 until 1990, 7% of the population claimed no religious affiliation. **[add to bottom of slide: 1970-1990: 7% "None"]** However, beginning in 1990, that number began to significantly increase. By 2010, the percentage of people who claimed no religious affiliation had grown to 17% of the population. **[add to bottom of slide: 1990-2010: 17% "None"]** Sadly, that number is much higher among young adults. In 1990, 12% of young adults had no religious affiliation. In 2010, that number had grown to 27%.

What prompted this major increase in religiously unaffiliated people? **[end slide]** A research project on that topic was just completed. The researchers discovered that by 1990, most Americans identified Christianity with religious-right fundamentalism. This brand of Christianity is seen, at least by many, as arrogant, hypocritical, judgmental and closed-minded. Over the past twenty years, that kind of fundamentalist religion turned off a huge number of Americans, and caused many of them to reject religion altogether. This, says the researchers, is the major reason for the major increase in people who now have no religious affiliation. (*The Christian Century*, "The Young 'Nones," November 30, 2010, p. 7)

Let me give you a current pop culture example. **[slide: Glee image, leave space for the print below]** Many of you are familiar with the hit TV show *Glee*. The music and dancing are great, but in my opinion it's too R rated for a show set in a high school. But regardless, it's a huge hit, especially among young people. In a recent episode, several high school students explain why they are turned off by organized religion. They believe that the church **[add to slide with bullets: Condemns gays, Down on women, Does not believe in science]**, condemns gays, is down on women, and doesn't believe in science. These kinds of perceptions about the church are why a large and growing number of people, especially young people, no longer have any religious affiliation. **[end slide]** These people are repelled by arrogant, judgmental,

closed-minded religion. They are saying—if this is Christianity—I want no part of it. This growing trend in America breaks my heart. In the past two decades, millions of Americans, especially young ones, have rejected Christianity and the church because of toxic religion.

Of course, this is not a new problem. In Jesus' day, there was also toxic religion. And, just like today, it turned people off, and turned them away from God. And that broke Jesus' heart. It also made him angry. Jesus had extremely harsh words for the arrogant and judgmental religion of the Pharisees, who were the hard line fundamentalists of his day. They were the only people Jesus didn't like and could not get along with.

And that's the story behind today's scripture reading. Let's look again at verse 9. Luke says, **[slide: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable." (Luke 18:9)]** Two phrases in this verse are instructive. First, the phrase, **[underline: "were confident of their own righteousness."]** That's another way of saying these people were arrogant. The other phrase is **[drop last underline and now underline: "looked down on everyone else."]** That's another way of saying these people were judgmental. So in this verse, and the parable that follows about the self-righteous Pharisee that prays in the Temple, Jesus harshly condemns arrogant, judgmental religion. **[end slide]**

Tragically, that kind of toxic religion is still around—and it's turning people away from God and church at an alarming rate. All of which brings me to the point of today's sermon. Our church and denomination, along with many other mainline and moderate churches, offer a positive alternative to negative religion. And people are starving for that.

Several weeks ago, a young man came to visit me. He was struggling with this issue we're talking about today. The religion of some of his family members, friends, and coworkers turns him off. He did not badmouth any of these people. He said they are good folks and he loves them. But he can't tolerate their arrogant, judgmental, closed-minded religion. He said to me, "Is there something wrong with me?" I said, "No! There is nothing wrong with you. Millions of people are turned off by that kind of religion, including me. More importantly, Jesus was turned off by that kind of religion." I then told him about the toxic religion of Jesus' day, and how Jesus offered a better option. In the face of the arrogant and judgmental religion of the Pharisees, Jesus offered a healthy alternative of humility, grace, mercy, compassion and

justice. Promoting that kind of religion is what mainline and moderate churches like us are all about. We are not perfect by any stretch. But we try to offer healthy faith to the world. We promote a religion of grace, not judgment. A religion of love, not hatred. A religion of open-mindedness, not intolerance. A religion of compassion, not legalism. A religion of humility, not arrogance.

That kind of religion is represented by our church motto: ***[slide: photo of our church sign with “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.”]*** But I would argue that this is far MORE than a motto. It’s who we are. It’s our culture. It’s our DNA. So, for the next three weeks, we are going to explore this motto in depth. I hope you will be here, and I hope you will invite others to come. ***[end slide]***

I want to close today by sharing an email I recently received from a person who attends church here—with her permission. She begins: “My family and I have been attending Lebanon First United Methodist Church for about a year now. I am convinced that we have made the right move, and I wanted to thank you for your part in this journey. I was raised in a fundamentalist church. Suffice it to say that my experiences were such that by the time I finished college, I was totally estranged from religion. Twenty years later, I realized that I was neglecting an important part of my life, and I began searching for a church home. I attended a few churches and was so discouraged. I wondered whether it was possible to find a church where my children would not hear hate and intolerance preached. Then one day I found your church website and was blown away by what I read. My family and I soon visited your congregation, and were overjoyed to find a church that practiced grace instead of judgment. So here we are, a year later, and I actually look forward to Sunday services each week. I feel God’s presence in my life for the first time in many years, and I want to thank you for your part in this process.”

That same kind of story has played out in our church hundreds of times over the past decade. People are hungry for a viable alternative to negative, arrogant, judgmental, closed-minded religion. Today, more than ever before, people are receptive to positive, vibrant, centrist, open-minded, grace-filled, gender-equal, life-giving, mainline faith. Offering that kind of Jesus-spirited faith is our God-given mission. Let us do so boldly!

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## A Church of Open Hearts

1 John 4: 7-11

***[Congregation sang “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” before the sermon]***

I’ve always loved that song. I used to sing it as a teenager in my youth group. Churches don’t sing it much anymore. That’s a shame, because the song is so true to the spirit of Jesus. In fact, this song was inspired by these words of Jesus in John 13. Please read them with me, ***[slide: scroll look, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34)]***

You see, ***[end slide]*** what matters most in the life of the church is not buildings, or programs, or staff, or attendance, or growth, or finances. What matters most in church is love. When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment? he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The main thing is love. That’s why our mission statement at LFUMC reads, ***[slide: with cross and flame, “Our mission is to be a great commandment church (love of God and neighbor) in the United Methodist tradition.”]*** If you were not here last week, we are in a short series called “More Than a Motto.” ***[slide of sign, same as last week, same as theme slide]*** We are walking through our church motto, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.” Today we come to “Open Hearts.” ***[highlight or underline Open Hearts]*** Our first and greatest goal as a church is to be a church of open hearts, a church that knows how to love. Nothing is more important. ***[end slide]***

I’ve been the pastor of this church for almost ten years now. And during those ten years, I’ve seen wonderful things happen. For example, we’ve reached a ton of new people, well over one thousand. Of course, we’ve lost plenty of people to death and moves, but we’ve grown dramatically. And that’s wonderful. But it’s not the main thing. And during the past ten years, we’ve added all kinds of new programs. Programs for children, for youth, for adults, and for our community. And that’s wonderful. But it’s not the main thing. And we’ve added new staff members who are doing a good job. And that’s wonderful. But it’s not the main thing. And we’ve made massive improvements to our facilities, and that’s wonderful. But it’s not the main

thing. And we've seen solid growth in giving, allowing us do more ministry in our community, and that's wonderful. But it's not the main thing. The main thing is love—love of God, love for each other, and love for others. That's what matters most, as we heard in today's scripture reading from 1 John. Let's look at that text again. Please read with me, **[slide: scroll look, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for loves comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4)]**

One of the great joys of my life is seeing love lived out in this church virtually every day of the week. For example, in recent months, I've seen our congregation reach out in love to one of our members who is critically ill. I've seen you pray for this person, and send emails and cards, and make visits, and take food and more food, and mow the lawn, and clean the house, and on and on. And, several months ago, I saw our 20/30 SS class get concerned about kids in our community who go hungry over the weekend. So they decided to start a backpack food ministry, and the response of this church was absolutely overwhelming. And if time permitted I could tell you a hundred of those kinds of stories. Everywhere I look, I see love lived out here. Love for God. Love for each other. And love for our community. We are truly a church of Open Hearts. Can we improve in this area? Of course we can. But love is alive and well at LFUMC, and that means more to me than all the growth and programs and staff additions and facility improvements and giving—combined. Why? Because love is the main thing.

Jesus knew that love is the most powerful force in the world. And that's saying a lot, because there are many powerful forces in the world. For example, **[slide: military image]** there is military power. And **[slide: Wall Street image]** there is economic power. And **[slide: US capital image]** there is political power. And **[slide: Oscar red carpet image of huge star]** there is star power. Sadly, **[slide: image of Arizona Safeway store]** there is also evil power in the world, the power of hate and violence that we saw in Arizona this week. **[end slide]** But the most powerful force in the world always has been, and always will be, love. That's why, more than anything else, we strive to be a church of "open hearts."

Let me tell you a true story. A woman named Karen and her husband found out that another baby was on the way. So they told their three year old son Michael all about it. They later discovered that the baby was going to be a girl so they told Michael he was going to have a

sister. Day after day, for weeks and weeks, Michael sings to his sister in Mommy's tummy. **[slide: a young boy about 3 with his face on or near his mother's pregnant belly]** He sings the only song he knows, "You are my sunshine." **[have them sing first stanza]** He sings it day after day, night after night. **[end slide]** The pregnancy proceeds normally. Karen goes into labor. But complications arise. Finally, Michael's sister is born, but in serious condition. The days go by. The little girl gets worse. The doctors tell Karen and her husband there is little hope, prepare for the worst. They contact a local cemetery about a burial plot. All the while, Michael keeps begging his parents to let him see his sister. "I want to sing to her," he pleads. It's week two in intensive care and things look bleak. The funeral will come soon. But Michael keeps nagging his parents about singing to his sister.

Finally, Karen makes up her mind. She will take Michael to the hospital, and like it or not, the staff will let Michael sing to his sister before she dies. She takes Michael to the neo-natal intensive care unit. The nurse says Michael can't come in. Karen says, "We're not leaving until Michael sings to his sister!" The nurse relents. They enter the room. Michael gazes at the tiny infant who is losing the battle to live, and he begins to sing as only a three year old can sing, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray ...". Instantly, the baby girl responds. Her pulse rate increases and becomes steady. Karen says, "Keep on singing Michael!" "You never know dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away!" The baby's strained breathing becomes stronger and stronger. "Keep on singing, Michael!" "The other night dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamt I held you in my arms." By now the baby is alert and vital signs are strong. Tears fall from Karen's face and the face of the nurse. Michael continues, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, please don't take my sunshine away." Funeral plans are scrapped. The next day—the very next day—the little girl is well enough to go home! *[William Bausch, The Word: In and Out of Season. p. 82-84]*

There is no stronger power in this world than the power of love. So God calls you and me to be people of love, and God calls our church to be a church of love. **[church motto sign again, highlight or underline "Open Hearts"]** In short, God calls us to be a church of "open hearts." May that be true in your life, and in mine, and in the life of this church.

**BONUS MATERIAL:** I once read a fascinating book by Anne Lamott called "Traveling Mercies." In that book, Anne tells how her church learned to become a church that loved others, a church of open hearts. Anne's church is a small Presbyterian church, and the

congregation is predominately African American. Well, a homosexual man named Ken began attending Anne's church. To complicate matters, Ken was dying of AIDS. Ken's partner had recently died. That loss, combined with his own impending death, brought him back to God and back to church. Most churches don't do a very good job of welcoming gay people, especially gay people with AIDS. But week after week, Ken kept coming to that little church, and slowly, over time, that congregation came to love Ken and claim him as their own.

However, there was a woman in the choir named Ranola who struggled with that. Ranola is a tall, strong African American woman. Although Ranola is basically a loving person, she had problems with Ken. She was raised in a church that taught that Ken's way of life—and Ken himself—was an abomination before God. Even though she loved Jesus and loved most people, she was having a hard time with this homosexual man with AIDS sitting in her church. And even though she knew better, she was a little afraid of catching his disease. So Ranola always looked at Ken warily from her place in the choir loft. But Ken kept on coming, week after week, for many months, as he slowly wasted away from AIDS.

Well, one Sunday, during the prayer time, Ken told that church how much their love meant to him. He said even though he was dying of AIDS, he felt loved by Jesus and by that church, and he was happy in his soul. Well, after Ken's testimony the congregation spontaneously started to sing "*Jacob's Ladder*." Everyone stood to sing, all except Ken, because he was not able to stand anymore. But he sat in his pew and sang along with the others. After *Jacob's Ladder* they began singing the old hymn "*His Eye Is on the Sparrow*." The whole congregation was standing except Ken, and all were singing "*Why should I feel discouraged? His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.*" Well, at that point Ranola looked at Ken sitting in his pew, and she knew what she must do. She left the choir loft, went to Ken's seat, and with her strong arms she gently lifted Ken onto his feet and held him next to her, draping his arms over her like a loving mother holding her child. The whole congregation saw what happened and they sang, with tears in their eyes, "*Why should I be discouraged? His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.*" In spite of her fears, and in spite of her prejudices, Ranola learned that day to love a homosexual man with AIDS. Ranola learned that day to be a Christian with an open heart. And that church, through that entire experience, learned to become a congregation of love, a church of open hearts. [Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 63-65]

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## A Church of Open Minds

*Mark 12:30, Galatians 3:23*

If you have not been here the past two weeks, we are in a series called “*More Than a Motto.*” **[slide: theme slide]** During these weeks we are walking through our church motto, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.” Today we come to the phrase, “*Open Minds.*” **[slide: highlight “Open Minds”]**

Unfortunately, people of faith are not always open-minded. Instead, religious believers are sometimes rigid, closed-minded, and resistant to new ideas. A few weeks ago I heard a story about a monastery. **[slide of monks in a monastery]** One of the monks died and they placed him in the large crypt where they buried all the dead monks. Three days later, the monks heard noises coming from inside the crypt. **[end slide]** When they removed the stone wall, they found their brother alive. He was full of wonderment, saying, “Oh brothers, I’ve been there. I’ve been to the other side. I’ve seen heaven!” Then he added, “And it’s nothing like what we’ve been taught. It’s not at all the way our theology says it is!” When he said that, the other monks threw him back in the crypt and sealed the wall.

Well, people of faith are not always open-minded! But in the UMC, we try very hard to be a church of open minds. Like all denominations, we have plenty of flaws, but we do a pretty good job of keeping our minds open. That does NOT mean anything goes. It does not mean that you can believe anything and be a United Methodist. But it does mean we are a church who is willing to ask hard questions, to grapple with our faith, to debate, to think. In short, we are a church of open minds. And we SHOULD be a church of open minds. That’s certainly the spirit of Jesus. In today’s text, our Lord says, **[slide: “Love the Lord your God with all your mind.” (Mark 12:30)]** In the book of Isaiah, the prophet says, **[add to slide: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.” (Isaiah 1:18).]** John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church said, **[add to slide: “But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.” (John Wesley)]** There are obviously some non negotiable items for Christians, primarily around the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But beyond our core beliefs, we can grapple, debate, and even disagree on our theology. In short, we can, in the words of Wesley, “think and let think.” **[end slide]**

Our Director of Education has a poster in her office that I love. Let me show it to you. **[slide of poster]** It says, “He died to take away your sins. Not your mind.” That poster illustrates the point today. We in the UMC strive to be a church of open minds.

I don’t have time to fully develop this theme today, so I want to illustrate what I’m talking about with just one example—women in ministry. **[slide of a woman pastor in a clergy robe]** As you are probably aware, most churches in American, both Protestant and Catholic, do not allow women to serve as clergy. But that’s not the case in the UMC. We have LOTS of women ministers, including women DS’s and even women Bishops. How did that happen?

Let me give you a quick historical and theological lesson on the subject of women in ministry in the UMC. United Methodists have four sources of theological authority. Let’s list them on the screen: **[add to the slide of the woman pastor, with bullets: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Reason.]** This is called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. These four sources of theological authority explain how the UMC came to have women clergy. First, we looked at scripture. **[underline Scripture]** And the truth is, when it comes to women in ministry, scripture is a mixed bag. Some passages affirm women in church leadership and even mention women preaching. However, a few passages in the Bible are negative about women being pastors, which can easily be explained by the historical context behind those passages.

Second, we looked at tradition. **[underline Tradition (drop the underline of Scripture)]** And just like scripture, tradition is mixed. During the first few centuries of the church, women served in many leadership roles, including preaching and pastoral roles. But then, for a lot of centuries after that, women were mostly excluded from leadership. However, in the past few centuries, women have played major roles in church ministry. So, like scripture, tradition is a mixed bag.

Next we looked at experience. **[underline Experience (drop the underline of Tradition)]** And our experience has been that women clearly have the gifts to be effective ministers.

Finally, we looked at reason. **[underline Reason (drop the underline of Experience)]** And reason tells us that women, like men, are created in the image of God, fully equal with men, and fully capable of being ministers in the church. **[drop the underline of Reason, leave all four words with the photo]** So, the UMC took scripture, tradition, experience and reason,

grappled with it, then said, we believe that the Spirit of God is telling us that women can and should serve as clergy, and the church has been deeply blessed by that decision. You might be interested to know that there are more women ministers in the UMC than any other denomination in the world. Why? Because we are a church of open minds.

When I think about this issue of women in ministry, I'm reminded of an old Peanuts cartoon.

**[slide: image of Charlie Brown]** Charlie Brown had just been beaten in a game by Lucy.

One of Charlie's friends chides him for losing to "a mere girl." Charlie answers, **[add to slide: "Girls aren't as mere as they used to be.]"** Well, girls are not "mere" in the UMC! Our church, more than any other denomination in the world, lives out Paul's great vision of gender equality as seen in Galatians 3:23, which says, **[slide with earlier woman clergy photo: "There is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Jesus Christ." (Gal. 3:23)]**

Lots of other examples could be given, but women in ministry is a great example that the UMC is indeed a church of open minds. **[end slide]**

As many of you know, I used to serve as a pastor in Honolulu, Hawaii. In my church there were a large number of seekers—people who were not yet Christian—but who were checking out the Christian faith. Most of them had Buddhist backgrounds. One of those seekers was a young PhD student named Mary, who was working on her PhD in microbiology. She came to my office one day to talk about science and Christianity, especially the subject of evolution. It's a long story that I don't have time to tell. But that day she asked me a question I'll never forget. She said, **[slide: photo of young woman about 25 years old in a chemistry lab. Put the following quote with the photo: "Dr. Thielen, can I be a scientist and a Christian?"]** In other words, she was asking, "Can I be a thinking Christian—a Christian with an open mind?" The answer to that question—at least in the UMC—is yes. A thousand times YES! Why? **[slide of the church sign, with "Open Minds" highlighted]** Because we are a church of Open Minds.

###

## A Church of Open Doors

*Luke 14: 16-23*

Many years ago, when Fred Craddock was a young preacher, he pastored a small church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was a beautiful little white church up on a hill. **[Slide: photo of peaceful, pretty white country church up on a hill]**. At that time, Oak Ridge was rapidly expanding. Lots of people were moving to town to help in the construction work. Many of the newcomers lived in a mobile home park located near the church. **[end slide]** The trailer park was packed with newcomers, including a large number of children. Fred saw all those new people and thought, our church ought to reach out to them. So at the next Board meeting Fred recommended a plan to reach out to the newcomers. “Oh, I don’t know” said the chairman of the board. “They might not fit in here very well.” Fred said, “But they live right next to our church. I think we should invite them to worship with us.” But Fred got resistance to the idea. They finally decided to table the discussion and deal with it at their next business meeting. At that meeting a leader of the congregation said, “I move, that in order to be a member of this church, you have to own property in the county.” “I’ll second that motion” said another man. Fred was mortified and passionately spoke against it. But in the end, the motion passed. As a result, no effort was ever made to reach out to the newcomers. Soon thereafter, Fred left that church.

Twenty years later, Fred and his wife were driving past Oak Ridge on a trip through Tennessee. Since he was single when he served that church, his wife had never seen it. So Fred decided to show it to her. As they drove to the church, Fred again told his wife that painful story of how the church refused to reach out to newcomers in the community. It took a while to find the church. Lots of new roads and homes had been built in the area, but they finally found the spot. The beautiful white frame church was sitting there as always, but something was different. **[slide: same white church as above]** There was a big parking lot out front, full of cars, trucks, motor homes and even motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot they saw a big sign in front of the church. It said, **[add to slide a sign out front of the church that says: “BBQ: All You Can Eat.”]** It was a restaurant! Fred and his wife went inside and the place was packed with all kinds of people—white and black and Hispanic. Rich and poor. Southerners and northerners. Fred said to his wife, “It’s a good thing this isn’t a church anymore. If it were, these people would not be allowed in.” **[end slide]**

That's a sad story but it happens a lot. There are many churches out there that are not very welcoming. But the Bible is clear. God expects the church of Jesus Christ to welcome all people. We see that in today's parable in Luke 14 where the master says, ***[slide (image of our church with this text) "Go out in the streets and invite all to come, even the poor the crippled the blind and the lame." (Luke 14)]*** Everyone is welcome in the house of God. Every church is called by God to be a welcoming church, a church of open doors. And that's true of our church here in Lebanon. We can certainly do better, but in recent years we have made a lot of progress in this area. Large numbers of people have flocked to our church. And you have done a good job of inviting and welcoming them. Dixie sang a song a moment ago called "*People need the Lord.*" And that's so true. People do need God. And they need a community of faith. So our job is to invite and welcome people—all kinds of people—to this church family. ***[end slide]***

I once heard a story about a young college student named Bill. Bill had wild hair, spiked with vivid colors, and he wore a nose ring. Bill always wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans and no shoes. Bill, a brilliant young man, became a Christian while attending college. He attended a Christian organization on campus, but he also wanted to find a church. Across the street from Ken's college was a well dressed, conservative, very traditional church. One Sunday Bill decided to visit that church. He walked into the sanctuary with his nose ring, no shoes, jeans and a T-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started, so Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat. But the church was packed, and he could not find a seat anywhere. By now, people were uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill got closer to the front of the church. When he realized there were no seats left, he squatted down and sat in the aisle.

Although this was perfectly acceptable behavior at his college fellowship group—trust me—this had never happened before in this church! The tension in the congregation was palpable. The preacher didn't know what to do so he stood there in silence. About that time, an elderly man, one of the old patriarchs of that church, slowly made his way down the aisle toward Bill. The man was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair, and always wore a three-piece suit. He was a godly man, very elegant, dignified, traditional, and conservative. As he started walking toward this boy, everyone was saying to themselves—you can't blame him for what he's going to do. They knew he was about to evict this kid. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid with a nose ring, wild hair, T-shirt and jeans and no shoes, sitting on the church floor? The old man walked with a cane, so it took a long

time for him to reach the boy. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the old man's cane. All eyes were focused on him. Finally, the old man reached the boy. He paused a moment, then dropped his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, the old man lowered himself and sat down next to the boy. He shook the boy's hand and welcomed him to the church.

I don't know if that elderly man or if that church was United Methodist. But I do know, at least at that moment, they were a church of open doors, and that it pleased God greatly. **[slide: Theme slide of church sign with motto]** May God help us to always be a church of Open Hearts, Open Minds, and of Open Doors.

**BONUS MATERIAL:** A few months ago I heard a seminary professor tell about a church he recently visited. He said the entire church was surrounded by a huge gated fence with spiked points. He said the church looked like a medieval fortified castle. You know what the sign out front said? "The friendliest church in town!" There are lots of churches in America that have signs out front that say, "Everyone Welcome." But if they were really honest, the sign would say "Everyone Welcome Except ..." Everyone welcome except black people. Everyone welcome except poor people. Everyone welcome except gay people. Everyone welcome except divorced people. Everyone welcome except liberal people. Everyone welcome except ..." You fill in the blank. But God calls the church to welcome all people. God calls us to have the spirit found in T. S. Eliot's classic novel, *"Murder in the Cathedral."*

In this historical novel, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, is in great danger. Powerful forces were conspiring to murder him. Near the end of the novel the archbishop is in the cathedral. In order to protect him, some of the priests lock the sanctuary door. But the archbishop cries out, "Unbar the doors! Throw open the doors! I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, the sanctuary, turned into a fortress... Open the door! I command it. OPEN THE DOOR!" Like that archbishop, God demands that his church open the door. We see that in today's parable in Luke 14 where the master says, "go out in the streets and invite all to come, even the poor the crippled the blind and the lame." Everyone is welcome in the house of God. Every church is called by God to be a welcoming church, a church of open doors.

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