

SERMON 'OPEN AND SHUT CASE'

When you hear the phrase 'open and shut case', what do you envision?

[cut and dried; no doubt; no need to look further...]

What meaning do you take from the question 'have you seen the light?' or Ann Landers's advice to wake up and smell the coffee.

[look differently at things...]

Sometimes just looking at things differently can lead us to new paths...not always an 'open and shut' case...born again?

I recall the first time I heard the expression 'born again.' It was during my career in social work when I was interviewing the mother of a family on my caseload. Even though religion wasn't a factor in my work with the family, the mother mentioned to me that she was a Christian and then asked if I was. I replied 'yes,' and before I could return to my role of 'asking the questions,' she inserted another question – 'are you born again?' I didn't know quite how to respond – intuitively I questioned whether my faith had ever died – but in an attempt to end this discussion and get back to why I was there in the first place, I half-heartedly replied, 'yes.' And I learned two things that day. First, as an inexperienced social worker, I learned just how quickly I could lose control over an interview. Second, life would later show me that this woman was on to something.

Life is indeed a journey, and it will always be incomplete. And it continually presents us with situations and opportunities to either give up, or grow and move forward. And our response is always a choice. Ambivalence is a word that exists in our vocabulary for a reason. While new words come and old words go, *ambivalence* is a mainstay of our language, because it's a mainstay of our lives.

Our scripture from Matthew this morning describes a meeting between Jesus and the devil. Looking deeper into its message, it could be seen as Jesus facing his own inner doubts; after all, if he was in human form, he may well have had doubts [you want me to what?] And after his desert experience, Matthew writes that *after the devil left Jesus, angels came and attended him*. And the story goes on to say that Jesus moved forward on his path...an increased awareness had come to him...his eyes had been opened further to where he was being called.

The gospels are full of examples people seeing things in a new light. The disciples increasingly faced situations that shook their beliefs into new awareness and possibilities. Peter, who denied even knowing Jesus during the turmoil surrounding Jesus' arrest eventually went on to preach on behalf of Jesus, as did Paul who is seen as the founder of the Christian religion. Stories of Jesus healing the *blind* illustrate how our views of our living can be changed when we look at situations with the question *what does love call us to do?* In our daily living, we experience a wide range of emotions in the mix of events and interactions we encounter. And it helps us to discern next steps if we *step back, take a breath, and truly discern our path*. We may want to react impulsively, but if we're feeling *ambivalent*, it's a sign that we may need to refrain from taking action, and instead wait for a new enlightenment to come to us. And when we've taken action from a more grounded position, we'll be more centered around what we need to do next.

The concept of *seeing new light* is reflected in other ways in our culture. One example is that of seeing a bright light when one is near death. This has been recounted numerous times by people who had experiences whereby they felt themselves being drawn toward a bright light in which they experienced deep peace and love. And while they often wished they could travel fully into that light, their spirit was sent back to its earthly presence with the message that it's not your

time. And the process of birth has a similar act of the fetus moving from the darkness of the womb into the light of the outer world at the moment of birth.

And in our own vocabulary we make reference to concepts such as seeing the light when we have gained new insight into a problem. Or we tell someone who is overly serious in a conversation to *lighten up* and express more optimism and hope, with which the concept of light is often associated.

And so, might these issues somehow relate to our own lives? Are there not those times in our own lives where we hit a roadblock in our own seeing and we hesitate to remove our blinders? I know it's true on my personal journey...and maybe some of yours too? But do we also know the feeling of liberation that comes from a true letting go of the negative energy within ourselves, the fear that we've somehow been abandoned, that we're not worth the love that we're offered, often by those who love us the most? We must surrender to our own blocks of blindness to let the true light of love and light come in. And when we do, we see ourselves and others in a more positive light. We discover new and admirable attributes we hadn't seen before. We come to admire and respect traits in others that we may previously have perceived as threats. Helen Keller was once quoted as saying "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision." As the words in the hymn *Amazing Grace* say, 'Once blind, but now I see'.

And so we come to the present reality of life here at Westminster. Many years ago, the folks at St. Andrew's church in downtown Windsor saw the need for an outpost to be built on the corner of Dougall and Tecumseh. The seeds of faith were planted here long before the building was erected. And here we are still standing and providing a vibrant presence of worship and community outreach. Through every time of doubt and trial, we somehow re-energized ourselves into

another new beginning. Thanks largely to our Minister David Williamson, we were introduced to new ways of viewing the challenges we faced, uncovering our gifts through the letting go of doubts and fears. There's a concept in music performing known as in the next breath, suggesting that we can correct any imperfect note in a song in the very next breath. The pace of music doesn't allow or require that we dwell on what has already happened – it demands us to implement the correct mechanisms into the next notes. And I think that as a believing congregation at Westminster, we've come to understand this notion. Our eyes have been opened to new possibilities.

And so, as we embark on our Lenten journey this year, let us see it a new light of hope. Let us see the concept of *fasting* as one of *refraining* from self-crucifixion and denial of who we are as humans. Let our inner selves be open to accepting our own imperfections. Seeing our inner selves is not always easy, but if we see ourselves in the same light that Jesus would, we can come to more self-acceptance and inner peace.

Our journey forward as individuals and as a congregation is a mystery to yet unfold before us. Living in the real world is not always an *open and shut* experience. Sometimes, we will be content with its flow. Sometimes, we'll be unsettled by its unpredictability. Our journey to enlightenment calls us to open our eyes to truly see where we each need to be. We may be afraid to see it, but as we surrender our fears and as we trust in God who gives us life, we'll be glad our eyes were open. Just as the angels came to Jesus after his desert confrontation with the devil, so are we comforted with the promise that *we are not alone*. AMEN.

Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. February 18, 2018.