

Wide Open

A few years ago, an evangelical Christian from Dallas, in his thirties, with a wife and young children, was diagnosed with leukemia, a cancer that produces toxic blood cells.

After several years of treatment, he only got worse, finally reaching the point where he was resigned to an early death.

At that moment, a bone marrow donor match is found, the new marrow cures him, and now he is cancer free.

Being a man of faith he sees his cure as sure-fire proof for the existence of God.

And, he really wants to meet the person whose marrow saved his life.

He finally does meet her, and much to their mutual chagrin, she is an atheist.

Which causes our now healed fellow no end of consternation, because he comes from a branch of Christianity that says unless you accept Jesus as your personal savior, you are doomed.

"There isn't anything she could do that I wouldn't forgive," he says of his donor, "my love for her is unconditional!"

"But I don't know how to deal with this problem of her lack of belief."

The donor replies, "I believe in goodness — and somehow your Jesus is just too small for me, your rules too restrictive, you exclude too many people of good will, so no, I will not be accepting Christ as you hope I will."

And there the two leave it.

Great friends, but with an impossible chasm between them.

And I could only think, listening to this story, how sad that the man's God is so small, and how the woman, though she claims to be an atheist, is probably closer to the mark of who Jesus calls us to be than most people.

How sad that our evangelical friend cannot see that he is making **himself** more compassionate, forgiving and just than he allows God to be — since he'll forgive the woman anything, while his notion of God doesn't allow God to do the same.

We are entering the season of Lent, a time of introspection, of entering into the larger mind of God, of deepening and broadening our understanding of just who God may be.

And perhaps the best place to start is by acknowledging that we each of us, from time to time, put God in one box or another — our human need to be in control constantly tempts us to define God in ways that justify ourselves, while condemning others.

Sister Joan Chittister puts it this way:

"To close ourselves off from the wisdom of the world around us in the name of God is a kind of spiritual arrogance exceeded by little else in the human grab bag of mistakes.

It makes life a kind of prison where, in the name of holiness, thought is chained and vision is condemned.

It makes us our own gods.

It's a sorry excuse for spirituality.

The sin of religion is to pronounce every other religion empty, unknowing, deficient and unblessed.

It ignores the call of God to us through the life and wisdom and spiritual vision of 'the other.'

When we close our eyes to the wonder of God showing up in the unlikeliest of people; when we shut our hearts to she who is different, we shut our hearts to God.

A willingness to see and hear God in **every human being** really does matter.

Openness to the presence of God in others is the essence of true prayer.

But in order to open our hearts, we need first to learn to open our lives.

A white fellow who's never shared a meal with a black man is a fellow who's missing an opportunity to grow.

The man who has never worked with a woman as a equal, or better yet, as a boss, is deprived of insight into the other half of the world.

The comfortable monk who never serves soup at a soup kitchen, or clerks in a thrift shop, or spends time in inner-city programs, lives in an insulated bubble.

The adult who never asks a child a question (and really listens to the answer) is doomed to go through life out of touch and uneducated by the innocent among us.

Openness is the door through which wisdom travels — where real prayer and understanding begins.

Openness is the mountaintop from which we see that the world is so much bigger, so much broader than ourselves, that there is truth out there that is different from our own, yet it is truth.

The voice of God within **us** — is not the only voice of God.

And there is this about 'openness.'

Openness isn't about being sweet and nice.

Nor is it polite listening to people with whom we disagree.

It's not even simple hospitality or a grudging tolerance.

Openness is the gracious abandonment of the mind to receive new ideas, to be amazed by new possibilities.

Without openness, real prayer is not possible, because God comes in every voice, is present behind every face, waits in every memory, and lives deeply in every struggle.

To close off any of these is to close off the possibility of becoming new again ourselves." Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light, Joan Chittister, paraphrased.

That closing off is what gets us tossed out of the Garden in the first place.

God says: "Enjoy every tree in the garden — eat your fill!

But stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!"

And I ask you, have you ever wondered what those other trees were like?

Is there a tree of joy?

A tree of service?

Of love?

Of compassion?

Are there trees of intimacy and imagination and art and song and feasts and wisdom and peace?

But all of those trees wither from our grasp when we choose to know the difference between good and evil.

We aren't equipped for it.

We aren't good at it.

Because judging others leads to "us against them," to nationalism and racism and sexism, which all lead to death: dead relationships, dead hopes, dead dreams.

Deciding what is good and who is evil puts every one of us in a place that only God can truly occupy.

That's why Jesus says let the weeds and wheat grow together, pushing back against our love affair with the speck in my neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in my own eye.

Which really is the central problem with pretending we know the difference between good and evil.

As soon as we decide that we do, we close everything else off.

Is that why we call it original sin?

Given a paradise with its boundless possibilities, it's never ending openness to new things and new ways of understanding life and each other, we choose the narrow, the boiled down, the "my way or the highway."

That's the dilemma our evangelical cancer survivor has with his atheist bone marrow donor.

The evangelical loves this donor unconditionally and no matter what the donor may do, that unconditional love will never leave the heart of the evangelical.

And yet, that same fellow believes that unless the atheist "accepts Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior" she is likely to be doomed by the god he believes in.

The God who ironically, is less capable than he is of love, of compassion, of simple human decency.

This Lenten season, perhaps we can make it our common goal to open ourselves wide to the Spirit of God that moves where it will, who loves all of creation, who welcomes everyone — simply because that is the nature of God!

This Lenten season, let's ask for the grace to see God in the hidden places, to find him among the least, the lost and the left behind.

We are each of us called to a splendid dignity, because God delights in all creation; in every grain of sand, and in every human being.

Lent is the season to reclaim that truth, to say: thank you!

+amen