

“Make the Circle Wider”

May 5, 2024

Scripture: Acts 10:34-36, 44-48; John 15:9-17

This story in Acts represents the conclusion of a much longer story that really begins with many of the writings of the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures. And it's a story that continues to play itself out in the life of the Church today. We've always struggled, as God's people, with how to identify who's in the circle of God's love and who's out.

In the Jewish Scripture we can look at Isaiah who talks about the whole world making its way to Israel and Israel as a beacon to attract others to the presence of God. Or we can read the story of Ruth, a woman from Moab, the hated enemy of Israel, who follows her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel and establishes herself there by practicing the ways of the community and eventually becomes the great grandmother of King David. Or we can look at the story of Jonah, who runs away from his assignment to take God's word to Ninevah, another hated enemy, so they can repent and God will spare them. Over and over those who were thought to be outside the circle of God's concern are shown to be included.

This story in Acts is no different. Earlier we found Peter visiting a home in Joppa and taking a little rest on the roof. He falls into a trance and sees a vision of a sheet loaded with different animals that are unclean to eat. Peter had never eaten non-kosher food, but he hears a voice telling him to take an animal from the sheet and kill and eat it. He recoils. He's never eaten anything unclean and he won't start now. But the voice tells him, “What God has rendered clean, you must not call profane.” The vision occurs three times and Peter awakes wondering what it means.

Just then, there's a knock at the door of his friend's home. A messenger from a Roman centurion named Cornelius has come asking to take Peter back to Cornelius for an audience. It turns out Cornelius is a good, charitable man. Even though he's part of the occupying army from Rome, he's well-regarded by the population and curious to learn about their faith. Peter realizes this might be what the vision meant. So, he goes with them to meet Cornelius, along with a few others from his group. After hearing Cornelius's story, Peter has a revelation.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” All his life he had been taught that the safest way to live was to seal yourself off from people who were not your kind. Now, this wasn't part of Jewish ethical teaching. There are all sorts of readings in the Torah that command embracing the stranger. And there are all kinds of stories in Jewish Scripture describing how people foreign to Israel can be welcomed and be their allies. So, it's not as though xenophobia, fear of the stranger, was built into Jewish teaching. But as we all know what's taught in our faith tradition isn't always practiced very well by the faithful. So, for Peter to be met with this clear example of God reaching out to Gentiles was a shock. Nothing in his life had prepared him for something like this.

What's really astonishing is how easily he was willing to accept it. I heard a story once from a woman minister who I think was a candidate to be moderator of our denomination. That's

the person who runs the national meeting and represents the PC(USA) around the country. We used to elect a new person every year to that position, now it's every two years, and we've taken to electing co-moderators for the last decade or so. But this woman told the story of her father who was also a minister. He was opposed to the ordination of women and was a pastor during the time when that was hotly debated in the 1950's. He attended the national meeting, the General Assembly, the year approval for ordaining women as elders was passed. When he returned to his church he met with the Nominating Committee, the committee in each congregation that recruits folks to be candidates as elders and deacons, and told them they needed to find some women willing to be ordained and serve as elders for the congregation. One of the members of the committee turned to him and said, "Wait a minute, Pastor, I thought you were against ordaining women." Without missing a beat, the pastor answered, "I am. But apparently God is not. We need to elect some women as elders."

I love that story because it shows what it means to take seriously the activity of the Holy Spirit. When change is called for, when our assumptions and beliefs need to give way, and the Spirit is moving us to a new understanding, what's our tendency? We resist. We ignore the Spirit's actions in our midst or deny that it matters. We don't like to change. We don't like to make the circle wider. We prefer comfort and security to the messiness of being more inclusive, more accommodating. You can hear it in the description of the "circumcised believers" with Peter. We're told they were "astounded," not happy or excited. I imagine a few of them may have been a little angry and probably all of them were scared.

When we include those we've always assumed were left out, it is scary. What if these new people change us? What happens to me and my place in the community if others are allowed to have a voice? What if we let the wrong kind of people in? I'm sure all those questions were rolling around in the heads of the early Christians as they saw this movement make its way across the Gentile world. It may be why when Paul first started evangelizing to Gentiles, he ran into a lot of resistance from Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, back in Jerusalem. The issue of inclusion was the first obstacle to nearly break the Church in those early days. And it's continued to be a problem ever since.

In his excellent book *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*, former denominational moderator and professor of theology the late Jack Rogers tells about his journey from opposing the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in church leadership to accepting and advocating for it. Jack was a loving, devoted and compassionate minister. But he was convinced the Bible forbids the inclusion of LGBTQ people into the full life of the church. By remaining open to the Spirit's movement in his life and studying scripture with people from diverse perspectives he came to see that the Holy Spirit was moving the Church in a new direction on this issue. And that the resistance by so many was borne more of fear than of conscience.

After recounting how the Church moved from using the Bible to defend slavery to a more expansive understanding of scripture, he writes, "faced with the issue of homosexuality, many churches are repeating the mistakes of the past. When churches meet a new situation where oppressed people are questioning the cultural status quo, many people instinctively become defensive and retreat...Instead of reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry,

many have again tried to make the Bible a law book, which they then apply selectively, only to those with whom they disagree.”

The key for Jack was to interpret the Bible in light of Jesus’ life and ministry. And what do we find there? What are the criteria to make us part of Jesus’ circle of love? “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love...This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus says these words while speaking to his disciples for the last time before his death. It’s right after he’s washed their feet, doing something for them completely unexpected. In that world, among Jewish people, not even a slave would be expected to wash their master’s feet because it was considered so demeaning. Yet Jesus insists on doing this. Love one another as I have loved you. It’s an act of love. He becomes for them the embodiment of complete submission. And he tells them they must do the same for each other.

When we make the circle wider we submit ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit among us and become Christ to one another. From that small beginning in the home of Cornelius our faith was transformed from an insular, protected, closed community to a movement capable of embracing anyone willing to accept God’s love. Our job is to give away God’s love as widely, as profusely, as lavishly and indiscriminately as we possibly can. And then, to find ways to give away more. Because there is no limit to that love. God shows no partiality. Anyone willing to cooperate with God’s purpose in the world is welcome to feast at God’s table. It’s a lesson the Church has to learn over and over again. Our Methodist sisters and brothers have just learned it for themselves this past week.

And there will always be resistance to it. There’ll be those who just cannot bring themselves to love people they feel are too different from themselves. And it can be tempting to give in to that resistance, to accommodate it at the expense of those who have been left out. But we are called to remain steadfast no matter how hard it becomes. At the risk of our own well-being as a community of faith we are called to share God’s love with the world and make the circle wider and wider so that more and more are included and are told they are loved for who they are, as they are. God shows no partiality; and neither can we.

Amen