

I Celebrate a Church...
Acts 10: 1-15, 45-48
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
June 30, 2019
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Today's story, from the book of Acts, is one of the many that we who have been in church for a while know well enough that we have quit being surprised by it. As people who don't have a real concept of the significance of clean and unclean...as people who came into the church generations after a distinction between Jews and Gentiles was being made...it is easy for us to read this simply as a historic text about the development of the church in the early years after Jesus.

And yet, we are reminded as we look at this story that while we get historical glimpses, the Bible isn't a history book. Rather it is a book of sacred stories that not only show us how we got to where we are but that help us to continue becoming the church and the people we are called to be.

So, let's dig into this story a bit. After all, we only read selected verses when really the story of Peter and Cornelius' encounter and its impact on the early church takes up the entirety of chapter 10.

The story begins with two people in two different locations. While both were praying men who worshipped the God of Israel, the great distinction was that one – Peter – was Jewish, while the other – Cornelius – was a Gentile. Both had visions. In Cornelius' vision an angel appeared and told him to invite Peter, a follower of Jesus, to come to his house. Meanwhile, Peter, too had a vision. His vision was of a large sheet, filled with animals that were unclean by Jewish standards. Peter, a faithful and hungry Jewish man, was told to kill the animals and eat. His response, more driven by religious understanding than his stomach's desire, was that he

would not eat anything that was unclean. And yet the voice responded to him saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”¹

And it was this proclamation that allowed Peter’s openness when the men Cornelius had sent to invite him to Cornelius’ home arrived.

Against everything reasonable within him, after all Cornelius was well-aware of the rift between Jews and Gentiles, but still Cornelius invited Peter into his home and his life.

And against Jewish law and practice, Peter went.

In the meeting of these two – a meeting set, Luke tells us, by God – the course of the church was changed. Not only did Cornelius and his household become Christians, but Christianity, at this point still a sect of Judaism, began its journey toward full acceptance and inclusion of those who had been left out.

This is a great story. It’s a great story even if we do just read it as a piece of history to help us understand the development of the early church. It’s a great story even if we just capture some of the best lines in it – lines like, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”² and “I truly understand that God shows no partiality...”³ and Peter’s beautiful response after seeing that Cornelius and other Gentiles had already received the Holy Spirit, when he said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”⁴

This is a great story of the early church as Peter and then others open themselves up to a new way of understanding, as they keep listening to the voice of a God who is always reaching

¹ Acts 10:15, NRSV.

² Acts 10:15, NRSV.

³ Acts 10:34, NRSV.

⁴ Acts 10:47, NRSV.

out and including more people, as they choose to set aside their previously held customs in favor of God's welcoming message.

But what's even better is that it isn't only the story of the early church. But this is the ongoing story of the church...over generations and centuries and still today. It is the story that we have been and are invited into time and time again...a story of the extensive reach of God's love.

So, what does this look like for us?

In a context where the distinctions of being Jewish or Gentile don't hold us captive...in a context where the words clean and unclean are more likely to be used to talk about homes than to discuss whether or not people are included...what word does this speak to us today?

If we're honest, we know that we don't need to use the same words to have the same situation. It may not be the distinction between Jew and Gentile or clean and unclean, but we know what it is to wonder if people should be included. We know what it is to keep distinctions between people. We know what it is to welcome people but not fully include them, to welcome them because we are "Iowa nice" but not to welcome them as they are, instead wanting them to come in and become like us. We know this, not because of a position this congregation has taken, but simply because we are human.

But we also know what it is to hear a new word.

Now let me take a minute and say that I'm not convinced the word is new in the sense of God's mind being changed. I'm pretty certain that all along God has been a God of all people...God has been a God whose heart and kin-dom are big enough for all. The challenge has been for us to hear it. Because even though at the core of our being, as people made in the image of God, inclusion is part of us, the reality is that our systems are set up all too often for

exclusion. We have adopted the belief that we can be more successful, more important, more powerful if we draw lines and boundaries, if we limit those on the inside to being those just like us. We have chosen to shape communities and systems all too often based of fear and scarcity rather than based on love and abundance.

So the new word that is there for us to hear, is really an old word...a word as old as God...a word that says that all are God's beloved children and that all are not only welcome to enter, but welcome to be fully who they are. And when we embrace that reality, wonderful things happen.

And we can see how this has happened again and again as people have listened anew to God. We can see it throughout the course of Christian history as people of different races have gone from being divided to coming together in their shared humanity. We can see it as women have been welcomed into leadership and brought their particular gifts to the tapestry of the church. We can see it as we have come to realize that the variety of sexual orientations and gender identities aren't problems to be solved, but that they simply represent the diversity of humanity.

It is no small thing that churches have come to understand, as Brandan Robertson writes, that "all of our divisions are human constructions with no grounding in reality. Our color, class, culture, sexuality, gender, political positions or religious beliefs do not actually cause substantial divisions, because at the end of the of the day we are still human beings, participating in the same life and light."⁵

And, church, it is no small thing to embrace that in the way we share life together.

⁵ Brandan Robertson, *True Inclusion* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2018), 10.

We live in a world where LGBTQ+ youth have much higher rates of depression, suicide attempts, homelessness and experiences of violence than their peers. And these rates are all too often higher for those who grow up in a religious context.⁶

We live in a world where too many LGBTQ+ people are in deep relationship with God and want to be part of a faith community but have been hurt too many times by communities that say “all are welcome” only to mean that they are welcome to sit in worship, welcome to give their offerings, or even worse welcome to be “prayed straight” by a community that can’t get past an approach of “loving the sinner and hating the sin”, but not welcome into leadership.

Friends, just as we no longer talk about the distinction between Jew and Gentile in the church, the hope is that the day will come when we no longer talk about distinctions of sexual orientation and gender identity. The hope is that the day will come, not when this conversation ends because we have all become the same, but when this conversation ends because we recognize that while these identifiers tell us something about each other they don’t make a difference in how loved we are by God or how deep our faith is or how true our calling to ministry is.

Unfortunately, in this world we are not there yet. And so, it remains important not only that we welcome all people but that we are a safe space for them to share their stories and use their gifts and celebrate their families. It remains important that we say to the world that there is room at the table for everyone and that we really mean everyone.

I celebrate a church that understands that the divisions of clean and unclean, loved and unloved are false, are made up, are human constructs.

⁶ Robertson, 11.

I celebrate a church that sees the humanity in another rather than defining the other by skin color or sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or age, gender identity or perceived inability, religious commitment or marital status.

I celebrate a church that also knows that these parts of human identity do impact people's lives, that doesn't dismiss the plight of people of color against whom so many systems are set, that doesn't dismiss the fear that LGBTQ+ people often have just walking down the street, that doesn't dismiss the reality that no matter how far we've come in gender equality women are still treated differently.

I celebrate a church that welcomes the fullness of who people are and doesn't ask them to check a part of their identity at the door, to pretend to be something they are not, to just fit the mold in order to be included.

I celebrate a church that is willing to extend the table – to put in another leaf or two – because someone new needs a seat, because someone with a different voice should be there helping to shape our life together.

I celebrate a church that is flexible enough to continue *becoming* even after it has been for a long, long time; a church that knows it has not arrived and does not have a final answer, but that keeps listening for new answers and nudges and realizations.

I celebrate a church that can listen well enough to hear things anew, that can redefine even old familiar words, that can let go of ideas that no longer make sense, that can let the Spirit move in its midst and that can become something different.

I celebrate that in so many ways we, First Christian Church, have already been doing this and I celebrate the possibility that again and again we, and others, too, can be that church.
Amen.