

“We Are Witnesses”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 5, 2019

3rd Sunday of Easter

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 10:1-17, 34-48

Today marks the culmination of an important process that we undertake in the church called confirmation. On this day, the church invites and welcomes young people who have reached a particular age – an age when we believe that they are able to understand and choose for themselves – are asked to be adult members of the church. In doing so, they will make or re-affirm the vows of baptism, and accept all of the opportunities and responsibilities that come with being part of a family: to care for and support one another; to take part in worship and service, to now be not only a learner and recipient of nurture, but potentially also a teacher and leader.

For these young people, this has meant that they have been attending classes together, studying the bible and learning about the church’s history and traditions. They have taken part in the service of worship and mission; they have been paired with confirmation partners who might lend some of their own wisdom and experience. Now, the time has come for these confirmands to cross over a threshold, to take on this new role in the family of faith. Maybe they won’t feel any different today than yesterday; maybe this was not the exact age when that understanding of faith fully comes; for, in fact, it will continue to emerge long after today; for many of us, it still is like the light of daybreak dawning; gradually, but surely.

And for the people of this age – the generation of these six young people being confirmed today – a new era is dawning. For, they will be among the first American generation ever to experience a world where followers of practically every major world religion will live and learn and work side-by-side. Some of us, among the older generations, we have experienced a glimpse of this; we may have a neighbor or co-worker here or there who comes from or adheres to a different faith tradition, but not to the extent that it is becoming and soon will be; where churches and mosques and synagogues will be found in nearly every city; where Hindi and Sunni and Hasidic and Catholic will all share the same gyms, libraries and coffee shops.

And so, in the generation to come, the question will need to be answered: how will these people of different faiths – all with different cultures, traditions and

beliefs – live together? Will they come to that place where they can declare – as we heard Peter say in today’s reading – that God shows no partiality; that all are beloved children of the same creator, members of the same global and local family? There are, if indeed this world they enter will be one on common unity and purpose, still thresholds to be crossed.

Today’s story begins with Cornelius, a Roman soldier, stationed in the regional capital city of Caesarea. You can’t get much more Gentile than Cornelius. This meant that – despite being a man who prays and uses his money to help the community – he could not be a member of the church because, according to the book of Acts, there were strict rules about who could and could not be baptized into Christian fellowship. In order to be baptized, they thought, a person needed to obey detailed Jewish purity laws, including eat only kosher foods. Someone like Cornelius, a Gentile who didn’t follow Jewish law, could not be a Christian; it was against the rules.

As the story opens, the Holy Spirit appears to Cornelius and tells him to send for Peter, a Jew and a follower of Jesus, who is staying in the town of Joppa. As the men sent by Cornelius are traveling from Caesarea to Joppa, Peter is on the roof of his home, praying. As he prays, he has a vision of a giant sheet descending from heaven, held by its four corners; a sheet filled with all kinds of un-kosher animals. As it descends, a voice says to Peter, “get up, kill and eat.”

Paul objects that he couldn’t possibly kill and eat the things in this sheet, since they are not kosher and he is a good Jew. Arguing with God is a kind of tradition among the Jews that we meet in the Bible. For, three times, the voice tells Peter to kill and eat; three times, Peter says no; and each time, the voice replies, “what God has made clean, you must not call unclean.”¹

That’s when the men sent by Cornelius arrive from Caesarea, and the Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with them. When they arrive the next day, Peter makes the connection between the vision of the sheet and his visit with Cornelius, saying, “it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean.” (v. 28) Peter can now see that his vision was less about food than it was about people. He not only eats with and stays with Cornelius and his family, he baptizes them into the family of God, and says, *now I realize how true it is that God treats everyone the same. He accepts people from every nation – all who have respect for him and do what is right.*

It is indeed the call of those in the church to remember and retell this story of God’s love for and embrace of all people – from all nations and ethnicities and

¹ Robert Williamson, “No One Is Unclean”

faiths – in the mission of God. The good news of God’s love – which was revealed to us through the life, death, and new life of Jesus Christ – is open to all people.²

And like the church of Peter’s day, we are being urged to cross over the threshold into a new world. The question for every denomination and faith tradition is: will we have the courage, like Peter, to be witnesses to what God is revealing to us and reject the traditional distinctions that we make on the basis of religion or culture; instead welcoming and accepting everyone into God’s family? When Peter says, “God shows no partiality,” he opened the possibility that anyone – and everyone – is welcome in the family of faith. For Cornelius, and for all Gentiles, the rules changed so that he and his family could come in. Who are we, then, to prevent God’s offer of blessing upon the entire human family? Who are we to stand in the way of God’s love?³

Confirmands, I invite you into a world where the message of God’s love for all people is just now dawning; and God invites you to proclaim your particular faith by loving and accepting people of all faiths today and tomorrow as your classmates, teammates, neighbors, co-workers and partners in mission. We are witnesses: to a God who loves all of creation, and to Jesus who gave of himself for all. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Israel Kamudzandu from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ David Lewicky, “Holy Calamity”