

“Bridging Old and New”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 27, 2021

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 148:1-4, 9-14

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 11:1-18

All religions – to some greater or lesser extent – struggle with the same basic question: how does our specific truth relate to the truths of other religious experiences? Is Christianity the only true religion? Or is Judaism, or Islam? How can we say that any single religious expression is true?

And as it relates to today’s passage – to this significant turning point in the story of the early church in Acts – if God’s Spirit and salvation is available to Gentiles, as it has been for Jews; the world becomes a vastly different place.

Seven years ago, when our family chose to get a dog, we decided that we also needed to install an invisible fence. For several weeks, we placed flags around the perimeter of the yard and trained our puppy to respect the boundary lines. In time, she knew learned the limits of where she could go before getting that little shock; and, at this point, she usually doesn’t even wear the collar anymore.

In fact, the only time that I can remember her going beyond the established boundary of the invisible fence in the past couple of years was during this winter’s biggest snowstorm. The visual clues that typically marked the boundary lines were buried, so – instead of stopping where she had learned the invisible fence was – she just kept going, and going.

This story about the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, which is retold in today’s reading, began in chapter 10. Everyone in this story – the two main characters, other witnesses to their encounter, as well as the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem – all of them experience surprise; they are each pointed by God in a new direction. For, the line between the circumcised Jews and all other uncircumcised Gentiles – though an invisible boundary – is no small matter. For Jews, that line is the difference between their existence and nonexistence; between the story of a people that lives on and a story that has come to an end.¹

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

What exactly plunges Peter into the boiling cauldron of controversy? His fellow Jewish Christians do not ask him, *why did you tell a household of uncircumcised people about Jesus?* Not, *why did you baptize them?* No, their first question is this: “Why did you enter the house of uncircumcised people and eat with them?”

While God has already brought many of Peter’s Jewish contemporaries to faith in Jesus Christ, they continued to practice many of Judaism’s traditional rites and customs – including male circumcision. And they most definitely did not share meals with uncircumcised people. After all, they could not even eat much of what Gentiles served, and would likely have been repulsed if offered.

So, how can Peter convince the church’s early leaders to change their ways and make room at their tables for Gentiles? He doesn’t seem to think he can by arguing with them. Peter seems to know that he must somehow show that his sharing of the gospel through eating with Gentiles is God’s idea; and not his own.²

So, Peter recounts the story of his visit to Cornelius’ home. In verse five, he reports that he “saw a vision.” In his sermon on Pentecost, Peter had quoted the prophet Joel’s promise that “your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” Now, it’s as if God has kept that promise.

In Peter’s dream, all sorts of critters are observed crawling and wriggling around on a giant sheet which falls from the sky: “four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of prey.” The implication is that many of these beasts were considered unclean in Judaism. Thus, when a voice demands, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat,” he is shocked and, so, proclaims, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” Peter, the faithful Jew, answers in the way that his tradition calls him to: he knows what is unclean; and avoids such things like the poison that he thinks they are.

Peter interprets God’s disruption of his sleep and biased thinking as the Spirit teaching him not to make distinctions between “them and us.” God is showing him that the traditions of his faith have created a boundary line that needs to be crossed; an invisible fence that has been covered up as if by a huge snowfall. What God had created – all of it – was clean, indeed.

Peter did not cross over his invisible fence until after he actually met Cornelius: going to his home and sitting at a table and listening to stories from members of his household. Peter moved beyond the boundary line after his encounter with particular

² Doug Bratt from *Center for Excellence in Preaching*

people. Only then did Peter understand that God shows no distinction between us and them; that God shows no favoritism.³

Commensality is a word that we seldom use; it basically refers to the practice of eating at the same table. Peter's Jewish Christian colleagues were far less upset about his sharing of the gospel with Gentiles than his commensality with them. They were angry, in other words, that he entered into Cornelius' home and shared a meal with him.

This story suggests that the identity of people with whom we choose to share meals says something about us. To whom we imitate God in Christ by practicing hospitality reveals how we see both other people and the God who creates them.

The God of all creation, the God who sent Christ into the world to save us all, is the same God who created Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people of all other religions. Religious diversity has always been a part of the natural order, and it remains so today. Only at the end of time will the reasons why there are so many different religions be made clear to us. Until then, we Christians will continue to live with the mystery of this remarkable variety while, at the same time, we claim our own salvation in Christ.

And while the number of “nones” – those who, when asked by pollsters, claim no religious affiliation – has grown in recent years, we still live in a deeply religious nation where Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others share the same neighborhoods, hospitals, supermarkets, and schools. Across the country, very different faith traditions increasingly bump into one another in small towns and big cities alike. How can we – as people of faith – work to ensure that these inevitable encounters will enrich our communities, and not destroy them? How can we respect the humanity in all of God's creation without losing our identity as particular households of faith? How can we model ways to creatively and productively encounter believers of other faith traditions; embracing the things that make us distinct, while acknowledging that, indeed, God shows no partiality?⁴

Jesus teaches Christians to love our neighbors, to seek to live in community with them. In an era of considerable inter-religious tension and conflict – not too unlike the first century when Peter encountered Cornelius – God offers us the opportunity to break through the invisible fences that sometimes divide us. Jesus calls us to cross over boundaries that wall us off from people in that other political party, that other denomination, that other ethnicity or faith tradition, that other socio-

³ Richard Game, “Peter's Invisible Fence” from *Day1.org*

⁴ Jan Love, “Encountering Other Religions”

economic class or race or sexual preference. Jesus calls us to break through those invisible fences that separate us from those who have hurt or ignored us, or those whom we have hurt or ignored; all so that we may see and love others as God sees and loves them.

In the long arc of its history, the church is always working toward a fuller understanding of the new things God is doing. Peter does not give an abstract theological defense of his actions. Instead, he shares his own experience, and how God led him toward a broader understanding of grace. When we encounter the Spirit who is pushing the church in new directions – whether it is racial justice, the ordination of women, interfaith cooperation, or full LGBTQ acceptance and dignity – it can be frightening. However, the work of the Spirit is not random or incoherent. The Spirit always pushes the church towards greater practices of God’s inclusive love for all people of the world.⁵

“God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life,” Peter says to his fellow Christians in Jerusalem. This miracle can only be expressed through a story told by someone straddling the past and the future, with no ground to stand on except that which is created by the Spirit of God. Peter crossed over the boundary line; he broke through the invisible fence and – in doing so – reveals to us the reconciling love of God for life together; life in its fullness. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.org*