

“THE INACCESSIBILITY OF ACCESSIBLE PLACES”

Acts 11:1-18

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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My knees are in pretty bad shape. I knew the only way I would be able to get around at Annual Conference in July would be to rent an electric scooter. Here is the story of my experience of getting from my hotel room to the Standing Committee meeting room in the convention center on my first evening in Cincinnati.

My scooter and I left the hotel room on the 15th floor, and got on the elevator. A sign clearly stated that the skywalk to the convention center was located on the second floor. So I pushed the button for 2. When we arrived on the second floor I scooted off the elevator but when I got close to the entrance of the skywalk I realized the only way to get there was to go down four steps. That wasn't going to happen. So I scooted to another area and found- again- four steps down- and then to another area and found the same thing.

I was starting to get a little frustrated. I was beginning to think the only way to get to the skywalk was to carry the scooter down those four steps which kind negates the whole reason for having the scooter in the first place. A hotel maintenance person walked by and I asked him how I could get to the skywalk which was just a few yards away and he said I had to get back on the elevator, go down to the first floor, go across the hotel lobby and get on another elevator and go up to the second floor. I said, “Thank you.” Then added, “It might be helpful if there were some signs here to tell you that.” He ignored me.

So, I scooted back onto the elevator, went down to the first floor, scooted the whole way across the hotel lobby to the other elevator, got on, and went up to the second floor where I could ride my scooter right up to the doors to the skywalk. Home free, right? Not so fast. The doors were not automatic. So, I had to push open the door with my left hand while I powered the scooter with my right hand. Fortunately, my arms are strong enough and long enough to accomplish this task. I rode across the skywalk to the entrance of the convention center and lo and behold- there was a disc to push for the automatic doors! But alas, it was broken- so I had to, once again, push open the door with my left hand while powering through with my right. Needless to say, my frustration level was building. But the elevator was right there so that cheered me up a little. My meeting was on the second floor, just half a floor up and I could see right where I needed to go.

I pushed the button for the elevator and waited. Nothing. I pushed it again. Nothing. I pushed it again. You guessed it- nothing.

It was Sunday night- several days before Annual Conference was to begin and the convention center was deserted. I rode my scooter around to the front of the center and found escalators that were actually working. So, I grabbed my bag and my cane and carefully rode the escalator down. The information desk at the entrance was deserted so I walked around for about 5 minutes and still could not find anyone.

As I was about to get on my phone and call the Conference Director, Chris Douglas, the information desk attendant returned. I told her I was trying to get to the second floor but the elevator wasn't working. She said, “Oh, did they forget to turn that on?” She made a phone call. I took the escalator back up to my scooter, got on, rode back around the center to the elevator, pushed the button again and waited. Nothing. Patience is not one of my virtues and at this point I was really getting angry and I was going to be late for my meeting. I pushed the button again and finally it lit up and I could hear the gears working and lo and behold the elevator doors opened and I got on, went up a half a floor to the second floor, got off and scooted to the far end of the building to my meeting room.

I learned my lesson that first night and for the rest of the week I went down to the ground level and crossed the street instead of taking the skywalk- but of course, the outside doors from the hotel to the sidewalk were not automatic either.

This hotel bills itself as “handicapped accessible.” I even called them Friday to ask. And the person on the phone said, “Yes, we are.”

Another story closer to home this time- I recently went to Marianjoy Rehabilitation Hospital to visit one of our members. Marianjoy is a very well regarded Rehab facility. The only parking, though, is in the garage about

a half a block walk from the hospital entrance. The few handicapped parking spaces were full so I drove around to the other side of the garage and found an empty handicapped reserved spot- I hung my disability placard on my rear view mirror, grabbed my cane and proceeded to walk over 100 steps (I counted them)- to the hospital entrance. That was just to the entrance, then there was a walk to the elevator and a walk down a long corridor to the room.

Who builds a rehab hospital and then puts the parking garage a half a block away? When my knees were healthy I would purposely park further away than I needed to just to walk a little more for exercise. Now, every step is painful and increases the risk of a fall.

Some of you may be thinking, "Yea, so what else is new? I experience this all of the time." Being disabled is new for me and I am realizing how much I have taken for granted. I hope not to do that anymore.

It is bad enough when you cannot get to where you want to go. But it is even more frustrating to find that places that claim to be accessible are really **inaccessible**. When that happens we have to figure out how to make it work for us and our disability. Or just give up and go home.

Inaccessibility is not limited to physical needs. Let's talk about the church. At Annual Conference a clergy friend who is African American went to his delegate table for the first business meeting and was insulted by another person at his table. Was Annual Conference accessible to my friend? We thought it was but one person at the table created an atmosphere of mistrust and unwelcome.

During a worship service at National Youth Conference while an African American woman was preaching, two teenage girls, one brown and one black, heard a group of white boys sitting right behind them spewing out one racist comment after another. Was NYC worship accessible to these young women? We thought it was, but those boys had another idea. And they created fear in a place of worship.

Gifted men and women are denied their place in the church, in the pulpit, because they are gay or lesbian or transgendered. Is the Church accessible only when we hide who we really are; when we hide who God created us to be?

Expecting to be unwelcome someplace is bad enough but it is much worse when inaccessible places masquerade as accessible and it is devastating when that place is the church. It may or may not surprise you to know that not everyone feels welcome in the Church of the Brethren. As much as the Church claims to be open to all we know that welcome is limited, especially if you are not white; if you are not heterosexual.

After the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I believe the most explosive story for the church in the New Testament is the story of Cornelius and Peter recorded in Acts, chapters 10 and 11. This is the story of the biggest change, the most vivid picture of God's radical desire for the young Christian community. This was a shocking story that upended everything the early church believed. Here is what happened. Peter just wanted lunch. That's all, just a little something to eat while he was at Simon's house in Joppa. But what he got instead was a vision that shattered everything he thought was true about God, about his faith, about the power of the Risen Christ, and about himself. Instead of a hearty meal, what he received was a stunning revelation that God still has new things to say and do in the church and in the world.

While waiting for his lunch, Peter went up to the roof of the house to pray. While he was praying he had a vision of a blanket being lowered from heaven and it was filled with all kinds of living creatures. The problem was that they were all the animals that every Jew knew they were not allowed to eat. There were camels, badgers, buzzards, lizards, eagles, ospreys, ostriches, and pigs. It was enough to make a good Jew lose his appetite. For centuries, since the time of Moses, these animals, birds, and reptiles have been on the "do-not-eat" list. They were considered detestable.

I wish we could understand just how important these dietary laws are to the Jews. They are more than just a diet fad or a low carb craze. They go beyond being vegetarian or gluten free. They are not a matter of etiquette or strange culinary habits. For the Jews they are a matter of survival and identity. They go beyond what you put in your mouth to what you believe in your heart. These laws are a matter of religious and communal identity, honed through centuries of practice. Down through the biblical generations the Hebrew people were forced to abandon their culture and customs and adopt those of their latest conqueror- the

Greeks, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Romans. All of these occupations and exiles weakened their national identity and their faith, and the people started taking on the customs and religions of their oppressors. They feared they would forget who they were so they valued strict adherence to their own religious and cultural laws. These laws defined them as God's people. The laws were, literally, a matter of life and death for the faith community.

Peter was a good Jew. He had a flawless Jewish pedigree. He grew up immersed in these laws. He knew that he was honoring God by eating only what was called "clean," "kosher." He probably knew the eleventh chapter of Leviticus by heart- all forty seven verses which named what was allowed to be eaten and what was prohibited. He would no more willingly eat something on the forbidden list than we would willingly eat a bucket of dirt.

But that day on that rooftop in Joppa changed everything. God's picnic invitation was so shocking that it had to be repeated three times before Peter responded. The repetition tells us that this is very important. While he is still trying to get his head around what just happened, three men arrive (three) telling him they were sent by Cornelius, a Gentile, who had had a vision of his own. Things just kept getting weirder and weirder for Peter.

He went with a few other Jews to Cornelius's house and the first thing he said to his host and the family and friends gathered there was, *"You know I am not supposed to be here. It is against Jewish law for me to be in the home of a Gentile. I really shouldn't be doing this. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean."*

And then Peter said something so revolutionary that he had to explain himself to the church leaders in Jerusalem. ***"I truly understand that God shows no partiality."*** For his whole life Peter knew that God did show partiality- to the Jews. The chosen people.

And then, before he could even get rolling on his sermon the Holy Spirit interrupted and filled all the Gentiles in the room. Peter had another "aha" moment- perhaps the most radical of all. He said, *"How can we withhold the waters of baptism from those who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."* Right then and there he baptized Cornelius and his whole household and welcomed them into the body of Christ.

Peter just wanted lunch. He wasn't itching to start a revolution in the church. He didn't want to get the guys back at the denominational headquarters in Jerusalem all riled up. He didn't ask to include the Gentiles- that idea was a revolting to him as eating a bacon sandwich with a side of pork chops. And that is the whole point- it wasn't Peter's idea. It could never have been Peter's idea. It was God's idea. And once Peter recognized the fingerprints of God on this whole bizarre scene- how could he not accept it?

You know how it is in the church-- good news travels fast and bad news travels even faster. The church leaders in Jerusalem got wind of this atrocity and they called Peter on the carpet. *"What were you thinking, Peter? How dare you eat with unclean people? This is unacceptable. Those people are unacceptable. You can't do this!"*

In their book, IF GRACE IS TRUE, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland write, *"When Peter stood before his peers in Jerusalem to defend his socializing with the Gentiles, I'm certain they reminded him what they'd all been taught: 'Do not associate with these Gentile nations that remain among you,' from the book of Joshua. Peter's response to them was revealing. He didn't debate the Scriptures with them. He didn't deny their religious tradition. He simply told them his experience, why he believed something new. His attitude toward Gentiles was not altered by reasonable arguments. It wasn't changed by the study of Scripture. It wasn't even transformed by three years with Jesus. Ultimately, it took a powerful experience with God for him to turn a new way. Trusting our experiences with God will **always** change us."* (1)

The leaders were silenced by Peter's statements. Their arguments ceased when they too recognized the fingerprints of God all over this scandal and they began to praise God. *"Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

Not only was this a moment of revelation for the young church, it was also a moment of conversion for Peter. If anyone knew what God wanted it was Peter- a lifelong Jew, the leader of Jesus's band of disciples, the first to preach filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Peter was the ultimate insider. If anyone

knew the rules it was Peter. Through Peter we see that God continues to lead us, to pull us, to teach us, to challenge us and to change us.

Peter baptized the Gentiles without the approval of the church leaders. He did it based on the fresh revelation God gave him and on his belief that Jesus was indeed the Lord of all, not the Lord of some. Never in a million years did he think God would welcome the Gentiles into the church, into the family of faith, into the inner circle. But Peter was beginning to understand that with God there was only one circle—the inner circle. No one stood on the outside.

Has it occurred to you yet that we are the outsiders in this story? We are the ones gathered in Cornelius's house, hanging on to Peter's every word. We are the ones surprised by the arrival of the Holy Spirit. We are the ones dripping wet from the waters of baptism—the baptism that was, until this very moment, prohibited to us. We are the ones that someone in Jerusalem didn't want to welcome into the church of Jesus Christ. We are the ones who were unwelcome, unclean. We were the outsiders. And yet, through the mysterious grace of God, and only the mysterious grace of God, we have been named as children of God.

We are the new work of God. We are the subversive element of the Gospel. And now, we who have received God's grace have the nerve to establish entrance requirements for others?

If those early disciples who stood much nearer the Christ-event than we were not prepared for the Spirit's fresh initiatives, how much less prepared are we? If Peter's generation of Christians could be astounded, what might the Spirit have in store for us? And why is that so frightening for the church today?

Conversion is a process that takes a lifetime— not a moment— for individuals and for the Church. It is a series of journeys, pilgrimages, excursions out into some unexplored territory where all that is known is the faithfulness of God.

We worship a God who is always calling us to move forward. No one in the biblical story is ever allowed to stay where they begin. Everyone is sent out on a journey— to move forward— whether they want to go or not. Why do we think the church today is exempt from this journey, from conversion, from transformation? And why should we want to be? Too often the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into God's new world.

William Willimon writes, "*Too much of mainline Protestantism (including the Church of the Brethren) is focused not upon conversion, but upon accommodation, adjustment, and the gospel reduced to the status quo. The book of Acts reminds us that change, turning, are part of the Christian lifestyle.*" (2)

And if we refuse to change, to repent, and to trust in God's new ways in our world then we might as well nail the church doors shut now and just go home.

In many ways, we in the Christian church today are just as exclusive as the Jews were in Jesus' day. We think we know who is welcome. We think we know who God wants to hang out with. We think we know— because we think it's us. There is no Christian basis for excluding others. We don't get to choose who is welcome in God's family—that is God's choice and God chooses everyone. Way back in the Old Testament book of Genesis God made it quite clear in the words spoken to Sarah and Abraham, "***In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.***" The Risen Christ made all things new. So when is the church going to act like it?

Throughout history the Christian Church has quite regularly launched strikes against one group or another, people who aren't like us, people who don't deserve to sit in the pews with us on Sunday mornings, people who don't deserve to stand in our pulpits and preach the Word of God, and even people who don't deserve to just exist. It happened during the Crusades, during the Reformation, and during the Radical Reformation when our Anabaptist ancestors were persecuted for breaking away from the established church.

It happened when the Christian church supported slavery and white people wanted to keep black people out of the church.

It happened when men wanted to keep women out of leadership.

It is happening now when the church places sanctions against gay men and lesbians, our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community.

It is happening now when people of color are told, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that they are not welcome here.

It happens when English-speaking Brethren complain that we sing Spanish language hymns at Annual Conference.

We see, in every generation, human resistance to each new thing that comes from God. So why are we so surprised when God does a new thing in our generation? Why do we act like God doesn't have something new to teach us?

Why are we so afraid, so angry, so mean to others?

No discrimination, no matter how biblically based we may think it is, can stand in the way of God's outreaching love. No matter how entrenched our prejudices, they cannot withstand against the power of the Holy Spirit. God does not create religions; humans do. God created the world and all living and life-giving things in it. God will disrupt and interrupt the boundaries human construct. No wall, no matter how high or how wide or how long can stand against the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

While we, in the Church of the Brethren, are hiding behind our Bibles, our Annual Conference statements, our church tradition, and our insincere words of welcome God is doing something extraordinary over at Cornelius's house.

While we are congratulating ourselves for how welcoming we are, people are leaving our church, this church, because they don't feel welcome.

I truly believe that something is happening in our world and in our church. God is doing a new thing, the Holy Spirit is poised to erupt upon us, the Risen Christ is calling us forward.

Something new is waiting to be born.

Something awesome.

Something unexpected.

Something life changing.

It is time, people, for us as a church, to lead, follow, or get out of the way.

Who are we to hinder God?

Amen.

End Notes:

- *IF GRACE IS TRUE, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, Harper One, 2003. Pp. 31-32.*
- *INTERPRETATION SERIES: ACTS, William Willimon, John Knox Press. 1988. P. 104.*