

## "FOLLOWING GOD BEYOND BOUNDARIES"

Acts 10:24-48

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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It has been several weeks since Easter Sunday when the tomb of Jesus was empty, and Easter is still rocking the world! In the book of Acts, we find God doing surprising new things through the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples of Jesus are just trying to keep up. Last Sunday we heard about how the Spirit of God whisked Philip away to the desert wilderness where he explained scripture to and then baptized an Ethiopian eunuch. This week we find Peter in his own confusing and transformative situation.

If anyone knew the rules of the Jewish faith, it was Peter. Born and raised a devout Jew he had followed the laws of Moses all his life. Even as a disciple of Jesus, who was also a devout Jew, Peter lived his life according to the laws of his tradition. He knew how important those laws were to his identity as a Jew and to his faith in God.

These laws had sustained his people for thousands of years --from their forty year walk to freedom to their times of persecution and oppression and even during their years of domination over other nations. The laws were vital and non-negotiable.

Among the most restrictive and sacred were the dietary laws. The Law was specific about what could and could not be eaten, what was clean and unclean for Jews. These laws connected the sacred with the common. They reminded the Jewish people that how they live outside of the temple was just as important as how they lived inside. The laws were not merely a matter of etiquette or culinary preference- they were a matter of life and death for a faithful people. These laws set them apart as a distinct nation. The dietary laws helped the Jews to stand against all temptations to assimilate into other nations and cultures. The dietary laws protected their identity and gave them very clearly marked boundaries.

Peter, even as "the rock" upon which Jesus would build his church, was a devout and unapologetic Jew. He would never, in a million years, consider eating any forbidden food. It would turn his stomach. Can you imagine going to someone's house for dinner and being served roast of puppy or fillet of kitten? If this sounds revolting to you, maybe you can begin to get an inkling of how Peter felt the day God sent a vision telling him to eat forbidden food.

Peter had been traveling and he was really, really hungry. He had a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven which contained every kind of forbidden food. He heard a voice saying, "Eat, Peter!" Maybe Peter thought it was a divine test of his obedience, so he said what he thought was the correct answer. "No way!"

Then the voice spoke again. "Eat, Peter. What God has made clean you must not call unclean!" It happened three times, which seems to be a pattern with Peter. Then the sheet disappeared, and Peter was left confused, and no longer hungry. Before long there was a knock at the door. Visitors had arrived and the Spirit told him to go with them. Turns out they were *Gentiles* sent by a *Gentile*, a non-Jew, and to make matters worse, he was a Roman centurion. The men told Peter that the man who had sent them, Cornelius, had a vision that directed them to Peter and instructed them to invite Peter to his home. So, Peter and few other Jews went to Cornelius's home and found the centurion and a large gathering of his family and friends. It was Peter's worst nightmare- *Gentiles everywhere!* Well, the worst, second only to a smorgasbord of forbidden foods!

At that moment, his vision from God made perfect sense and so began Peter's conversion. Peter told Cornelius and his guests, *"You know I am not supposed to be here. It is unlawful for me, a good Jew, to be in the home of unclean people like you. But God has recently made clear to me that God shows no partiality. God's love is not just for a select few but for all people who open their hearts to receive it."*

It was a startling moment for Peter, for his Jewish companions, and for the *Gentiles*. For as long as they could remember the *Gentiles* had been told by the Jews that they

were not good enough, were not worthy of God's love, were not welcome in God's family. And now, here was one of God's own men, Peter, of all people, telling them that his understanding of the ways of God had changed and they **were** loved and they were welcomed. Peter told them about Jesus and in the middle of his sermon the Holy Spirit swooped in and poured itself all over those *Gentiles*. Peter recognized the divine moment and called for all to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is a beautiful moment-proof that the joy and surprise of Easter never expires but only expands. And really- when, in the Bible, does God **NOT** do surprising things? A baby Messiah born in a barn? A servant king who washes feet? A son of God who touches lepers and heals the unhealable? A horrifying death on a cross? An empty tomb? A risen Savior? Imperfect disciples changing the world?

Even so, Peter is stepping way out of bounds and once word gets back to the religious headquarters in Jerusalem, he is going to have some serious explaining to do. He just broke about every religious law that he could break. He welcomed "unworthy" people

into God's family without the approval of the church council, without the foundation of tradition or the proof of scripture.

Although it appears he is about as far out on a limb as he can go-- he is actually speaking on the authority of God and on the affirmation of Jesus Christ. The love of God is doing a new and wonderful thing and Peter was wise enough **not** to get in the way.

Peter and the disciples thought their lives were turned upside down when they met Jesus. But ever since his death and resurrection, things are happening so quickly they can hardly keep up. The Holy Spirit of God is pushing them in totally new directions, calling them to do absurd and frightening things.

The book of Acts tells story after story of walls knocked down, barriers shattered, and solid tradition broken open all by the power of God's love. It is exhausting and it is exhilarating!

I have a great deal of sympathy for Peter and the other Jewish Christian leaders. They were doing their best to follow the rules and suddenly the rules changed. The law didn't actually change, but the Holy Spirit called them to change their interpretation of it. The words of scripture they had based their lives on now had a new meaning and that was really God's intention all along. And it was all based on love.

All of the wisdom Jesus shared with his disciples in three years and all of the wisdom God imparted to the Jewish people in the centuries of their covenant relationship was boiled down to three words: "Love one another." The words of the prophets, the Ten Commandments, the laws of Moses- everything- every single word of instruction, command, and expectation could be said with three simple and profound words. LOVE. ONE. ANOTHER.

Jesus said, "Love each other the way I have loved you. With total acceptance, openness, welcome, support, encouragement, challenge, and hope- with no boundaries."

The book of Acts in the New Testament is the crucial hinge between the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the growth of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit. That power brought change, and as we well know, change is not always welcome. Everything the disciples thought they knew was now up for grabs as the Holy Spirit brought startling visions and new understanding.

If the disciples had made a list of the people they wanted nothing to do with- you can be sure that is where the Spirit would send them. There were many church council meetings in Jerusalem where they had to explain themselves and their actions. There were many

angry people who threatened them. More than one outraged mob actually killed those with whom they disagreed.

While the disciples, led by the Spirit, were tearing down walls of separation, some of the faithful were furiously trying to build them back up again. I don't really blame these people for opposing change. After all, they were faithful people who loved God, played by the rules, and tried to live their lives as they had been taught. They had believed in and trusted the words of scripture for generations. They were good, faithful people. The problem was, they were so devoted to the words of the law that they couldn't see what the Giver of the law was doing right in front of their eyes. They were so tied to tradition that change of any kind was a threat to them and to what they believed.

For some, the words of scripture were carved into stone as historical artifacts rather than lived out in the flesh and blood of Jesus. As the Holy Spirit breathed the breath of God into the world, bringing new life, they were desperately trying to hold on to the old life. It was a losing battle, for nothing can stand against the power of God's love. And God's love was all about welcome and expanding the family of faith.

Church historian, Rosemary Radford Ruether once wrote that the church must be organized to do two things: to pass the tradition from one generation to another; and to be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation.

I believe that God continues to reveal deeper and richer understandings of scripture to us.

I believe that God is still speaking to us, still acting in ways visible and invisible; in ways that are obvious and ways that are subtle.

I believe that God is calling the church today to move forward in ways that surprise and excite us and in ways that terrify us.

No matter how many ways we, as human beings, can invent to divide ourselves, God continues to find ways to put us back together again, to make us whole.

Rather than spending all of our time rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, the church should be creating a whole new seating arrangement with room for everyone.

Theologian Karoline Lewis suggests, *"If God can become human, then there are really no restraints, or restrictions, no boundaries or borders that can in any way curb or control the extent of God's love.... For God so loved the world."*

It is way past time for us as the Church, it is way past time for us as citizens of the United States, it is way past time for those of us who are white, to stop thinking that we are the only ones allowed in the room, that we are the only ones that God loves.

We see in the stories of Acts that the boundaries of the "inner circle" of the faithful kept growing wider and wider until it got the point where boundaries were no longer necessary.

Our scripture text today is not the story of Peter and Cornelius, it is the story of the Holy Spirit and how she operates in spite of human boundaries and barriers.

We can build as many border walls as we want and the Spirit of God will bring them all tumbling down, brick by brick. We can make our churches as isolated and insulated as we possibly can and still, the power of God's Spirit will keep knocking on the doors until there are no longer any doors to knock on.

The wounds of exclusion run deep in our world and in our churches. Some wounds have been festering for generations - covered with a thick layer of scar tissue, and some are so fresh they are still bleeding. We cannot ignore them. We cannot pretend they don't exist. We must, with courage and faith, allow the Spirit to move in and through us to bring healing, transformation, and new life.

Peter and Cornelius were both instruments of God's justice and inclusion. They both kicked over barriers. They both followed God's call, in spite of their fear. And by doing so, they extended the table and made room for everyone.

In a year of so much pain and heartache; so much grief and fear, we saw a ray of sunshine and grace last January on, of all places, the steps of the U.S. Capital. On Inauguration Day a young black woman in a brilliant yellow coat spoke simple words that reverberated around the world. In her poem, "The Hill We Climb," Amanda Gorman, spoke honestly of our shameful past and gloriously of our possible future. Watching her speak, I felt as though I had been to church.

She said, in part:

*"And yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine.*

*But that doesn't mean we're striving to form a union that is perfect.*

*We are striving to forge our union with purpose,*

*To compose a country committed*

*To all cultures, colors, characters,*

*And conditions of man.*

*And so we lift our gazes not*

*To what stands between us,*

*But what stands before us.*

*We close the divide,*

*Because we know to put our future first, we must put our differences aside.*

*We lay down our arms so that we can reach our arms out to one another.*

*We seek harm to none, and harmony for all.*

*Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:*

*That even as we grieved, we grew,*

*That even as we hurt, we hoped,*

*That even as we tired, we tried.*

*That we'll forever be tied together, victorious,*

*Not because we will never again know defeat,*

*But because we will never again sow division."*

She ended her poem this way:

*"We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover,*

*In every known nook of our nation,*

*In every corner called our country,*

*Our people, diverse and dutiful,*

*We'll emerge, battered but beautiful.*

*When the day comes, we step out of the shade,*

*Aflame and unafraid.*

*The new dawn blooms as we free it,*

*For there is always light,*

*If only we're brave enough to see it,*

*If only we're brave enough **to be it.**" (1)*

With God's help, may it be so.

Amen.

*End notes:*

*"The Hill*