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Acts 10: 34-36; 44-48

Belonging: Who is Invited and Welcomed?

This morning we hear a passage from the book of the Acts, a passage where the apostle Peter shares the good news with a community that is far removed from his familiar life and ways. Peter was a Jewish fisherman from Galilee, most comfortable around his people. Even in Jerusalem he stands out a bit – you might remember that when Peter denies he knows Jesus, one of the ways Peter was identified as a follower was by his Galilean accent. How many times have I heard in my life as I have moved around...”You’re not from around here are you....”

This morning we find Peter in Caesarea – a town built by King Herod (yes – that King Herod). It was the Roman governmental center of Judea, home to Roman courts of law, as well as the headquarters for the Roman military forces that occupied Judea. Not really the kind of place you expect to find Peter shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion. And yet here is Peter sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to this non-Jewish community. Hear now these words of promise from Acts 10 as the Gentiles hear the good news and receive the Holy Spirit.

Acts 10: 34-36: Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.”

Acts 10: 44-48: While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

What does belonging look like? Feel like? Sound like? These are the questions that opened a special issue of the *Presbyterian Outlook* in April. This summer in our worship services we will explore through a wide range of scriptures what it means to belong to God, belong to this faith community and belong to each other. We got off to a great a start last week, with our guest preacher Dr. Melissa Borja. Dr. Borja reframed the narrative of the refugee as a stranger we welcome to that of someone with whom share points of connection, as “neighbors with whom our lives are deeply intertwined and interdependent.”¹

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtJ02gNaoV8>

This perspective – that of our connectedness and interdependence as a people and community is deeply theological. It is a consequence of what theologically we call the incarnation, what we celebrate each Christmas, that God became flesh and dwelt among. I like the way it was phrased in our Call to Worship last week: “In Jesus Christ, the God of heaven made a home on earth, becoming our neighbor, living next door, living with us.”² These words came from an issue of the journal *Reformed Worship* featuring liturgy for a worship series titled *The Art of Neighboring*. Now some may be dismayed by the movement of yet another noun into a verb, but I love the idea of *neighboring* as an action, rather than an object. I also appreciate the recognition of *neighboring* as an art. And like many types of art, neighboring benefits from changing your perspective, seeing the world through a different lens than you have before.

The apostle Peter certainly would have resonated with this. In this section of the Book of Acts we see some dramatic changes in Peter’s understanding of who God is calling into the body of believers and what they need to do to be welcomed into the family of faith. One of the tensions of the early church was how to live into the words of the Great Commission. Words that are echoed by Jesus in the beginning of the book of Acts: “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Sounds great doesn’t it... but the reality of how those who were followers of Jesus who came from the Jewish tradition and those who came from non-Jewish traditions – the Gentiles – learned to worship, pray and yes eat together was fraught with tension, to put it mildly. The ensuing culture clashes resulted in conflicts big and small, as the Book of Acts and Paul’s various letters share. It was not rainbows and unicorns in those early days. Nor has it been since. The work of the church is hard and it requires transformation – work of transformation that is led by the work of the Holy Spirit. Because it was solely up to us, I imagine the outcome would not be the same.

You see Peter struggled in those early days to understand how a community could be formed from those from such different traditions. How could he, one who observed the Jewish religious traditions like circumcision and the dietary laws laid down by Moses – how could he make disciples of those who did not follow the same path he did unless **they changed**. For Peter these non-Jewish believers must adopt the ways and traditions of the initial followers of Jesus. They must be circumcised and they must follow the dietary laws. And then something happened and Peter’s mind was changed.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, shares Peter’s mind change this way.... A few days before our story in Caesarea, Peter was in the town of Joppa, healing and preaching. About noon one day Peter went out on the balcony to pray. While praying Peter got hungry and

² Laura de Jong. *The Art of Neighboring*. *Reformed Worship* 148; Worship Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church.

started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, Peter fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket was lowered and settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: “Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.”

Peter said, “Oh, no, Lord. I’ve never so much as tasted food that was not kosher.” The voice came a second time: “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.” This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies. Peter was puzzled by this vision, but his ruminations were interrupted by three men who showed up at the house where Peter was staying and invited him to go to Caesarea to the home a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, so Cornelius could hear what Peter had to say. And Peter went.

That is where we pick up our story this morning. Peter is at Cornelius’ house where people have gathered and he shares with them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter proclaims, “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” Talk about Good News. Peter tells them how the message of Jesus has spread from the early days in Galilee. And he invites these non-Jewish Gentiles to hear the Good News – the good news of the free gift of grace that fills us – fills us to overflowing in a world that that says we have to fit a certain set of parameters to be loved. No more. This gift is for all people.

What Peter proclaims is the miracle of transformation that happens when the Holy Spirit gets involved. The circumcised believers (that is those who came from the Jewish tradition) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

And Peter goes even farther and doesn’t just say that it is ok to baptize them... he says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” What a change in the mind and posture of Peter... he says nothing about the need for circumcision or following the dietary laws or keeping the Sabbath. The Holy Spirit has not only transformed these Gentiles into followers of Jesus. The Spirit has also transformed Peter into a radical act of invitation and welcome, as he understands that the Spirit was poured out “even on” the Gentiles.

Think about those “even ons” in our own life. Who are those who we don’t think are worthy or deserving or have followed the rules enough to have a seat at the table? Those who come from someplace else...those who don’t have the right pedigree or skin color or sexual orientation or political views or status or lifestyle for their voice to be heard and embraced. Are we open to having our minds changed by the power of the Holy Spirit – like Peter’s mind was changed?

How My Mind Has Changed is the title of a periodic column that the magazine *Christian Century* runs. The description of the column reads... “During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it’s tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one’s mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, “How my mind has changed.”³

One of the most powerful articles in this series that I have read was by the English author Francis Spufford who wrote about how his mind was changed about accepting same sex marriage. He says, “what changed my mind ... was thinking about how the church—the whole body of believers spread across space and time—changes its mind historically...how, in every conceivable future short of the arrival of the kingdom, it will need to go on changing, as human situations change and the Holy Spirit continues to work within us.”⁴

Rather than seeing same sex marriage as an outlier, Spufford lays out a number of issues whereby the church’s view on a particular issue has been modified. He says, “And looking at it, I have come to realize that the process by which we come to adjust our sense of how much we should be bound by the rules of the past is not recent, not some invention of liberal modernity. It is utterly mainstream in Christian history.”

On this weekend when we recognize the Juneteenth holiday, I want to specifically lift up Spufford’s recognition on how minds were changed about slavery. He says that biggest of all changes in our Christian history is our recognition of the distinctions between the “...the time-limitation of bondage among the ancient Israelites” and the systems that enslaved so many in the Americas in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Spufford reminds us that “The abolitionist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries could not point to an unambiguous and established [biblical] rule against slavery as such. ... They had to discover a fundamental incompatibility between the prophetic thrust of scripture toward justice and mercy and the idea of humans owning humans, between the Bible’s fundamental picture of personhood and the idea of humans as commodities. ... The scandal here is not the change but that it did not come sooner.”

Spufford concludes, “I’ve come to think that while Christian history is messy, it has a pattern. The pattern is this: where a rule and a principle are in conflict, the principle in the end prevails. In the end, with much heat and shouting and foot-dragging and confusion, we always set aside the rule, or remake it, in order that we may live more fully by the principle.”

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/we-have-be-willing-begin-again>

⁴ Francis Spufford. From rules to principles. *Christian Century*. July 28, 2021, vol 138 No. 15. p26-31. Online at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/how-i-changed-my-mind-about-same-sex-marriage?reload=1652188210857>

I imagine the apostle Peter would see himself in Spufford's words. Where a rule and a principle are in conflict, the principle in the end prevails. Jesus' words of invitation and welcome, Jesus' instruction to love and to feed and to baptize and to offer healing even on the Sabbath these are the principles of our faith. Principles that ask us to let go of the control of who is invited and welcomed in and who is not. This was not easy for Peter to do – it required the Holy Spirit to intervene. As Peter said about the non-Jewish Gentiles, “ ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Peter invited them and welcomed the Gentiles into the fold. He told all who would listen that these new believers belonged – belonged in body and soul – to the community of believers who followed Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit out an end to controlling who is in and who is out. New Testament professor the Rev. Dr. Eric Barreto, says it this way (words that appear in your bulletin for preparation). “A Christian vision of belonging is also a giving up of control. We have been invited into the life of a God who invites people we would prefer God would not invite. That reality of a wild God who continues to draw people together who we would prefer not to be together, is where the real challenge of the Christian witness of belonging lies.”⁵

This is the real work of the church. The real work for each one of us. The real work to examine our souls for who we perceive those people are – the ones we look down on because they don't check all of the right boxes – and recognize that God pours out the Holy Spirit even on them. This is hard work – this work of transformation of ourselves – when the narratives we believed for so long are challenged. When we allow ourselves to be uncertain about what we were sure we were right about.

We have real work ahead of us my friends. Real work to not just welcome the refugee, but to go beyond that so we know each other stories and we can belong to each other. As we celebrate refugee awareness month and week, I invite you to participate in one of the events sponsored by the organizations that make up the All Faith Alliance for Refugees. You will hear about one of these in our Minute for Mission this morning. I also invite you to attend Adult Ed this morning, as Stephanie Nawyn will share thoughts on welcoming new neighbors.

We are called to be a community of belonging. To be the ones who are the vehicles of love and grace. We are called to have our minds changed sometimes when a rule and a principle are in conflict, such that the principle of God's love and grace in the end prevails. And praise be for the power of the Holy Spirit to be the vehicle for that transformation. Amen.

⁵ Eric Barreto and Willie James Jennings. *Belonging*. *Presbyterian Outlook* . April 5, 2023. Available online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/03/belonging/>