

May 18, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Leviticus 19:33-24 & Acts 11:1-18

Rooted & Engaged: From Welcome to Belonging

During this season of Eastertide we are looking to the disciples and the early church to gain a deeper appreciation of what a life that is rooted and engaged looks like. Rooted in Christ and Engaged in the community in which we dwell.

This morning we hear a pivotal passage of scripture from the early church. Our passage from Acts is part of a longer narrative of how Peter – the apostle on which Christ said he would build his church - has a crucial change of his mind about what it means to be **belong** to the community of Jesus followers. Peter has returned to Jerusalem after a trip to Joppa and Caesarea. While in Joppa Peter had a dream about whether the Jewish dietary laws are a necessity for the Gentile followers of Christ. Following his dream, Peter goes on to the town of Caesarea, a town built by 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.

While in Caesarea Peter visits the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. A gentile. While Peter was preaching at home of Cornelius, the the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Acts chapter 10 ends with these words, "The circumcised believers (that is those Jewish heritage) 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 Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Our story picks up here in Acts Chapter 11. Hear this Word of God from Acts 11:1-18:

Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

But I replied, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made

clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

The New York Times is not the first place that you would think a pastor would find insights for sermons. Or maybe it is. After all there is much occurring in our country and our world that scripture speaks to. But recently I have been drawn to a number of columnists who are addressing faith issues in their writing, sharing their personal experiences as people seeking meaning and purpose in a world that too often can feel like it is spinning off its axis. So a column that starts “Last week, Dwight from “The Office” called me to talk about God.”¹ totally got my attention. I am a big fan of the early seasons of The Office – I think the episode with George Forman grill is sheer brilliance.

The May 4 column is titled *People Want to Belong* and was written by Lauren Jackson, who for the past year has been reporting on how we experience religion and spirituality in a column titled *Believing*. After opening with the provocative line about Dwight, she continues : “Almost. It was the actor who played Dwight, Rainn Wilson. He’d read my essay that launched “Believing,” a project on how people find meaning in their lives — in religion, spirituality or anywhere. He’d written a best-selling book on the topic, one that was so self-aware and funny I actually laughed out loud. He just wanted to connect.”

This desire to connect was the thrust of her story. Jackson shared, how over the past year, her inbox has been flooded by stories of people wanting to share their stories about belief: “MAGA bros, professors, wellness influencers, theologians, climate activists, pop psychologists, grandmothers and a source who sent me an unpublished letter from Pope Francis. ... In the messages, a clear trend emerged that unites this very disparate group: People crave meaningful connection.”

¹ Lauren Jackson. *People Want to Belong*. *The New York Times*. May 4, 2025. Online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/04/briefing/believing-faith-belonging.html>

Jackson summarized what she has learned in writing the “Believing” column: “religion offers people three B’s: **beliefs** about the world, **behaviors** to follow and **belonging** in a community or culture.” She said “Readers seized on the last one. They said they wanted to belong — in rich, profound and sustained ways.” To belong.

I think that is the lesson Peter learned in his vision in Joppa. There is a difference between “welcome” and “belonging.” And what people wanted — almost 2000 years ago in the Ancient Near East and what people want today is “to belong.” As the early church grew from Jerusalem — living into the Great Commission they were given by Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of **all nations, baptizing them** in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” — there were challenges and tensions. Yes, the apostles wanted to welcome new believers, they wanted to follow Jesus’ words 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.” And yet, 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.

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 adopted his ways — the right ways. They must be circumcised and they must follow the dietary laws. Sure, Peter and the other apostles and the Jewish community would welcome them, but **to truly belong** to the community of Jesus followers, these non-Jewish Gentile believers must adopt the ways and traditions of the initial followers of Jesus.

It took a dream — a vision — for Peter to understand the Spirit’s call to not to make a distinction between “them” and “us”. It took a vision for Peter to live into the words of his ancestors, words we heard Connor read from the Hebrew scripture book of Leviticus: Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” You must love them as yourself. You must remember that you were once one of the people who didn’t understand the rules, who didn’t speak the language, who didn’t know the customs. You were more than welcomed into the community, you belonged to the community, belonged to each other, so you must do the same. There is no “them” and there is no “us.”

Peter must have felt some chagrin for all of the times Jesus had to be patient with him, explaining the same concept over and over again. For all of times he missed the forest for the trees, unable to see the big picture and getting stuck in the weeds. The Holy Spirit woke up

Peter. Peter preached the good news of Jesus to the Gentile crowds and before Peter could even finish his sermon, the Holy Spirit came upon them. And Peter baptized everyone in sight, the whole Gentile household.

I can imagine Peter shaking in boots – well sandals – as he went back to Jerusalem and shared what just happened – what he just did – to the elders and leaders of the Jewish followers of Jesus. He said: “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

That was a hard question for Peter to ask. It is a hard question for us to ask. A hard question because we may not like the answer we get back. Am I hindering God’s intent for building a community of belonging? Peter certainly got an answer he did not expect and he “expands the terms of belonging. His vision gives him the spiritual authority to welcome non-Jewish believers, to draw the lines differently. Because of Peter’s vision, a God-fearing gentile can be welcomed with open arms.”² as the Rev. Sarah Scherschligt shares in a commentary on this scripture. As I shared in the words of preparation in the bulletin, Rev. Scherschligt says, “... As a pastor, I take great comfort in knowing that questions of identity and belonging are as old as the church. I take my cue from Peter and his friends that the proper response to people wanting to join in is not “let us give you a quiz” but “this is a reason to praise God.”³

I heartily concur. It is a reason to praise God. Scherschligt ends her commentary with words I did not include in the words of preparation, but may in fact be even more relevant: “The heart of Christianity is never what we do; it is what God does. The community of God’s people doesn’t spring up from our activity; it comes from God. Peter’s vision was, after all, from God and not of his own making. As long as we err on the side of love and stay open to the Holy Spirit’s guidance, we follow the commandment Jesus gave the community formed in his name: to love one another, so people will know we are his disciples.”

That is our charge – to live so that people know we are Christ’s disciples. That charge was the underlying message of the confirmation curriculum we used this year. Titled *Changing the World. Confirmation for the Missional Church*. it reminded us that “Jesus called the disciples to walk with him, learn from him, emulate him, and meet and minister to strangers, aliens, impoverished or ritually unclean people. The disciples **belonged to** Jesus by answering his call, following and observing him, and making mistakes along the way. The disciples were Jesus’ apprentices in the ways of God.”⁴

² Sarah S. Scherschligt, In the Lectionary. May 15, Easter 5C (Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35) *Christian Century*, 2022. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/may-15-easter-5c-acts-11-1-18-john-13-31-35>

³ *ibid*

⁴ Mark D. Hinds. *Changing the World. Confirmation for the Missional Church*. *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 2023

I love that language: the disciples – and that includes all of us - **belonged to** Jesus by answering his call. That is what we recognize in those who are joining the church through confirmation. And it is what we recognize in our graduating students. They are each answering a call to explore the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. As they move from nest of familial belonging to world where they will forge new paths, their identity as belonging to God will not be changed. In life and in death, and in life beyond death, we belong to God. We all belong to God and this “belonging” gives us a community in which we can flourish.

I began my message this morning by quoting from Lauren Jackson’s column, *People Want to Belong*. I want to end with a bit more of her insight. She says: “People need to be in strong communities to flourish, defined as being in a state where all aspects of their lives are good.”⁵ She quotes from a recently released Global Flourishing Study ⁶ which found that people are more likely to flourish – to thrive - when they find meaning and purpose in their lives. The data indicate that flourishing is not the same thing as happiness, with one of the key differences being that “flourishing includes the contexts in which a person lives; such contexts include one’s communities and environment.... The community’s well-being is a part of one’s own flourishing—a person participates in the common good of the community.”

I think this is what Peter was sharing with the religious leaders when he returned to Jerusalem. For the followers of Christ to truly become his body and a flourishing community, they needed to recognize that they belonged to each other. Welcome was not enough. The collective well-being mattered. There is no “us” and “them.”

As we get ready to for our Intergenerational Mission Week in June, I want to share the vision statement from one of the partners with whom we will work – The Refugee Development Center. The RDC is a nonprofit organization created in 2002 to provide critical services for refugees in mid-Michigan. By providing formal and informal learning opportunities, the Center aims to be an open and inclusive place for refugees to learn and locate the resources they need to flourish as residents and citizens.⁷ I am going repeat that last phrase. “To flourish as residents and citizens.”

God, through Moses, told the gathered Hebrew people at Mt. Sinai that any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. “You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.” Peter told the leaders in Jerusalem that as the body of Christ grew beyond those of the Hebrew tribes, there is no “us” and “them.” While our country and its leaders may not currently espouse those values, we as disciples of Christ are called to embrace them. We are called to move from welcoming just those we want at the table to creating a society where everyone knows that they belong. May it be so

⁵ Lauren Jackson. People Want to Belong. *The New York Times*. May 4, 2025. Online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/04/briefing/believing-faith-belonging.html>

⁶ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44220-025-00423-5>

⁷ <https://refugeedevdevelopmentcenter.org/en>