

### All Are Welcome

Last week we read the story of Paul's conversion. After a dramatic encounter with Jesus, he changed from a man intent on stamping out the Christian movement to one of the most outspoken leaders of the Jesus Way, intent on spreading the gospel as far as he could.

This morning we read another dramatic story, about stretching the boundaries and determining what lines we can or cannot cross.<sup>1</sup> Peter had been with Jesus from the beginning. During the course of Jesus' ministry, Peter emerged as a natural leader among the disciples. He confidently declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God.<sup>2</sup> He boldly promised that he would stand with Jesus to the bitter end – that he would die with Jesus, if the need arose.<sup>3</sup>

Peter also made some huge mistakes, contradicting Jesus when he predicted his own death<sup>4</sup> and after Jesus' arrest, denying that he even knew him.<sup>5</sup> But after his resurrection, Jesus restored Peter, entrusting to him the vital task of shepherding the early church.<sup>6</sup> During the events recorded in Acts 10, God challenges Peter to expand his welcome to people he thought of as ineligible to be part of the Christian community.

**Prayer:** *God, often we fail to live in the wideness of your love. Stretch us this morning as we reflect on the story of Peter, Cornelius, and the Jerusalem church. Speak to us as we think about who we welcome and who we exclude, either by what we say or what we don't say; by what we do or what we don't do. Give us courage to love those close to us and those we keep distant. Amen.*

Most of the other stories we read about Peter in the book of Acts take place in Jerusalem among his own people, the Jews. The story we've heard this morning demonstrates that Peter's journey with Jesus also takes him significantly beyond his comfort zone. Here we find him in Caesarea, a considerable distance from his more familiar territory of Judea and Galilee.

Caesarea was named in honor of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. The city contained a temple where the Roman emperor could be honored and worshiped as the god who guarantees peace and security throughout the empire. Caesarea was also the home for the Roman governors charged with ruling this region.

In Caesarea, Peter encounters Cornelius. Peter follows the Jewish laws. He tries to avoid all things deemed profane or unclean including non-Jewish, uncircumcised people known as Gentiles. Among all Gentiles, the worst are the Romans who conquered Israel, desecrated the temple, and aided in the killing of Jesus. Among the Romans, the worst are the military, especially the officers, whose job it is to keep the Jews in line. When God sends Peter to a Gentile, a Roman military officer no less, he finds himself face-to-face with the worst of the worst of the worst. His boundaries are stretched as he considers what people a Jew may associate with.

I often wish we could transport ourselves back in time and experience these stories as they are happening. Knowing firsthand the context and the culture would aid our understanding of the events and help us as we attempt to apply the lessons we learn to our lives today.

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<sup>1</sup> The information about Acts 10-11 comes primarily from the *Bible Insight* written by Jacob Elias and the teachers' notes written by Jamie May Smith in the Summer 2014 teacher's book of the *Gather 'Round* Curriculum published by MennoMedia. Supplemental information comes from BCBC on *Acts* written by Chalmer E. Faw, published by Herald Press.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:16

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:33

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:22

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:69-75

<sup>6</sup> John 21:15-19

For example, as we read the story from Acts 10, it's helpful to remember that there was a wide range of views among first-century Jews about how they might relate to non-Jews, to Gentiles. Some kept a strict distance, for fear of being contaminated by contact with them. Others felt free to relate to Gentiles, but only after they had converted to Judaism. Still others accepted Gentiles who worshiped God and lived in accordance with the moral law, even if they were not circumcised and did not follow Jewish rituals.

Where was Peter on the continuum of Jewish views about Gentiles? As I stated earlier, we know that he was devout, following the guidelines given to them by God. However, the story states that Peter is lodging with Simon, a tanner.<sup>7</sup> This fact probably demonstrates that he is already on a journey toward the inclusion of non-Jews. Tanners were regarded as unclean since they worked with animal hides. Many Jews would avoid tanners at all costs.

Cornelius is described as a devout Godfearer, a man of prayer, and a generous man who gives liberally to help the poor. He's a Gentile who follows many of the Jewish worship practices and customs, but he hasn't converted to Judaism. While praying, he experiences a vision, in which an angel instructs him to send for Peter, a Jew residing in the city of Joppa.

Like Cornelius, Peter also has a vision. When presented with all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds to eat, Peter recoils and says: "No way, Lord! These animals are forbidden in the dietary laws of the Hebrew Scriptures! I've never eaten nonkosher foods like these before—not once in my life!"<sup>8</sup>

The response from heaven is: "If God calls something permissible and clean, you must not call it forbidden and dirty!"<sup>9</sup> After this happens three times, the sheet with the animals is raised again, leaving Peter to ponder the meaning of this vision.

When the delegation from Cornelius arrives, the Spirit prompts Peter to invite them in and then travel with them to Caesarea. It's amazing that Peter overcomes any fear or hatred he has for Roman officers and goes with these men without hesitation.

There Peter addresses the gathering crowd. He shares his "aha" moment saying: "God shows no partiality." He now realizes that what started out as unclean animals in the vision has come to symbolize unclean human beings, the Gentiles. God accepts anyone who truly reverences God; who repents and is willing to change; who does what is right.

While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on the Gentiles, much to the surprise of the Jewish believers, perhaps including Peter himself! God is doing this! God is bringing about a revolution in human history! This "Gentile Pentecost" leads to the baptism of those who confessed Christ and received the Spirit.

Predictably, this action in Caesarea brings about a reaction in Jerusalem. You can read about this in the next chapter, Acts 11. News that Gentiles have accepted the Gospel of Christ reaches the apostles, who express their dismay about Peter's close associations with these people. Though they criticize Peter for eating with Gentiles, the real problem is the deeper one of circumcision. For them the rite of circumcision was given as an eternal sign and seal of God's covenant, never to be broken. Therefore, Peter's action is against the will of God and quite inexcusable.<sup>10</sup>

So Peter travels to Jerusalem to give his report. The initial opposition from the Jerusalem leaders is silenced as Peter shares his experiences. The facts of his story make it clear that opening the door to Gentiles is God's action, not Peter's. Eventually they conclude: "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 10:5-6

<sup>8</sup> Acts 10:14, *The Voice*

<sup>9</sup> Acts 10:15, *The Voice*

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 17:9-14

<sup>11</sup> Acts 11:18

At the Jerusalem Conference, recorded in Acts 15, Peter gives further testimony to his boundary stretching experiences. Peter speaks about how God is at work among the Gentiles and says they shouldn't be forced to follow Jewish law to become accepted followers of Jesus. The leaders respond by opening the door for Gentile participation in the life and ministry of the church. However, there are a few restrictions.

Even for Peter the attitude change isn't complete. He continues to struggle with how to relate to Gentiles. In Galatians 2, Paul says that Peter stopped eating with Gentiles when some Jewish people came to visit him.

As you may recall from previous sermons over the years, a key verse for me when it comes to matters of inclusion or exclusion is Acts 11:17. At the end of his report to the church at Jerusalem, Peter says, "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?"<sup>12</sup> Other translations read: "Who was I to interfere with God?"<sup>13</sup> Or: "Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the entire biblical story, both the Old and the New Testaments, it seems that two big questions come up over and over again. (1) How can I be faithful to God? To God's laws, to God's word, to God's wishes? (2) Who am I that I can hinder God? Stand in God's way; interfere with God?

How do we proceed when the answers to those questions seem to contradict each other? How do we proceed when God doesn't speak to us in a vision, or send someone to our door, or when two different people are certain that God has spoken clearly to them and the messages are at odds with each other?

This account of Peter and Cornelius, Gentile converts and Jewish Christians is about stretching boundaries. It demonstrates the wide welcome of God that stretches us beyond our own understanding and imagining.

Paul wrote about this wide welcome in his letter to the Galatian Christians.<sup>15</sup> A shared faith in Jesus overcomes boundaries between groups of people. There is no division between Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. All are in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Think for a moment about what Paul would write to Christians in Salina or in Kansas. What categories would he name? Who is welcome here? What boundaries need to be stretched?

Throughout the history of this congregation, we have welcomed people who some other congregations might tend to exclude. Most of the time these people have a prior connection with someone in the congregation. But how would someone with no previous contact with us know that this is a safe place for them to worship?

One way is by adopting a welcoming statement. Here are a few examples from some Mennonite congregations.

**Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church – Wichita, KS:** *We welcome all persons without regard to their race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, social status, education, ability, or any other factor subject to discrimination and exclusion in our world.*<sup>16</sup>

**Houston Mennonite Church – Houston, TX:** *We are excited to join God in welcoming and celebrating people of all orientations, gender identities, ethnicities, races, ages, documentations, economic statuses, mental or physical abilities, marital statuses, or other differences, into the full life of our church. The church grows more vibrant as we embrace one another. All those looking for a church home are invited to Houston Mennonite Church. Here, everyone is fully welcome.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 11:17, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 17:9-14, *God's Word Translation*.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 17:9-14, *New International Version*

<sup>15</sup> Galatians 3:23-29

<sup>16</sup> <https://lorraine.church/join-us-at-lorraine>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.houstonmennonite.org/open-affirming>

**Albuquerque Mennonite Church – Albuquerque, NM:** *We of Albuquerque Mennonite Church are committed to Jesus’ call to be a growing community that embodies God’s love in the world, a community that cherishes and practices worship, healing, hospitality, peacemaking and respect for all. Open and affirming, we hold that every person is created in God’s image, valued without regard to origin, sexual identity, affiliation or status.*<sup>18</sup>

Over the years, various people have encouraged our congregation to adopt a statement of welcome. Ideas related to this emerged from our day of visioning a year and a half ago. Work on this was put on hold during the events of the past year, but now is the time to proceed.

Discussion of a welcome statement will be on the agenda for our next congregational meeting. I encourage each of you to read over the three examples and think which one most closely represents what you would write about our church. What would you change or add?

There are four things – at least – to keep in mind as we proceed. First, anytime more than one person attempts to write something, it is easy to get bogged down with the wording. I anticipate that we may not agree about how long the statement should be; about which differences or identities should be named. I trust we will find a way to not get too hung up in the details.

Second, it is important that we hear from everyone during this process. We need to practice welcome with each other, recognizing that there will likely be differences of opinion among us, not only about wording, but also about the need for such a statement. I hope that we will work together with humility, honesty, openness, and understanding.

Third, as we write a statement of welcome, we will also need to decide whether or not to become a member of the Supportive Communities Network of the Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests.<sup>19</sup> Membership in this network would add weight to a welcoming statement, confirming that our church would be a safe place for all, without regard to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Fourth, even as we anticipate writing a statement of welcome, we acknowledge that some boundaries are needed. We have limits on who can be in the church nursery when children are present. There could be some people we would allow in the building only under certain circumstances, or even not under any circumstance. These would be decided on a case-by-case basis. Healthy boundaries make church life safe for everyone.

The story of Peter and Cornelius reminds us that our past understandings may have been limited.<sup>20</sup> It demonstrates that prayer is risky business. Sometimes what God says will change our lives, will change our families, will change our congregation. As we pray together, may our minds and our hearts be open to any visions God might send. May we be willing to take the risks needed to accomplish God’s goals. May the Spirit of God guide us and challenge us as we seek to faithfully follow God and not get in God’s way. Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.abqmennonite.org/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bmclgbt.org/scn>

<sup>20</sup> This paragraph draws from Joanna Harader, *Shine at Home: Spring 2021*, MennoMedia, [www.shinecurriculum.com](http://www.shinecurriculum.com), p. 48.