

Expanding Our Circle of Inclusiveness

Acts 10:44-48 John 15:9-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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You have heard me mention on a number of occasions throughout the years that **just because we consider ourselves an inclusive congregation, especially from a social and theological perspective, doesn't mean that we are all-inclusive.** Yes, this is more of a prophetic statement than a pastoral one, yet it's not meant to beat ourselves over the head. Rather, it is simply **an ongoing challenge** to us as a congregation, and certainly to each of us as individuals, to continue to do the work necessary to be the people and the community of faith God has called us to be.

Perhaps it is a bit comforting to know that inclusiveness has been a struggle in the Christian movement since its inception 2000 years ago. The first great controversy of the early church was whether to admit Gentiles into the community of faith who did not first convert and become Jewish, or at least follow the laws of Moses. **This painful issue of who to admit into the community of faith still plagues Christianity today.** Churches often make it very clear that membership in their particular congregation must follow sometimes strict, yet often unspoken rules. Not many congregations would admit this, however. After all, "We're a friendly congregation!" Well, maybe to each other. It doesn't take long for any visitor to get an internal sense of whether they would be fully welcomed.

A sense of being unwelcome can be based on just about anything that distinguishes one group of persons from another. We know the list: race, economic condition, social status, sexual orientation, theological perspective, political leanings, and sometimes even based on marital status, gender, or age. **When we are honest with ourselves, are there not types of individuals or groups of people that you and I consider as "the other?" Do we not struggle with partiality and playing favorites?**

In an intentional effort to counteract our own human nature to be wary of strangers, especially those we'd put into the category of being "not like ourselves," **our Mission Statement here at College Hill begins by declaring our intention to: "Build an inclusive community of faith."** And that is why at our annual Session Retreat in January we formed the new **Visitor and New Member Nurture ministry team.** In fact, they are hosting a New Member Luncheon (and prospective new member, along with the elders on the Session) after worship today!

Yet, in both the Old and New Testaments we are given the impression that the Jews either despised or intentionally excluded all who were non-Jews. We learn that **the early church had a hard time expanding their circle of inclusiveness. Their challenge is ours today. What would it take to expand our circle of inclusiveness?**

For the past few months, our Adult Church School class has been brilliantly led by Bert Woodall. He is walking us through the New Testament Book of Acts, from the

perspective of the biblical and historical scholars at the Westar Institute. They are the folks who brought us the Jesus Seminar, who attempted to walk through the gospels to determine which of the words ascribed to Jesus, as in red-letter Bibles, may or may not have actually been said by him. Their work showed that **much of the gospels were less a recording of actual history and more the authors' attempt to convey their theological understanding of the nature and character of Jesus and his message and ministry.**

Years after the Jesus Seminar looked at the gospels, a new group, called the Acts Seminar, went through a similar exercise with the Book of Acts. Working from 2001 through 2011, they published their results in the 2013 book, *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report*. Of particular interest is one of the Seminar's scholars and the book's editor, Dennis Smith, a New Testament professor at Phillips Theological Seminary here in Tulsa. Sadly, he passed away recently.

The Acts Seminar's overall conclusion is that much of the material, which may have some basis in historical events, is more closely a representation of what was occurring in the early Christian movement in the first decades of the 2nd century. In other words, these are not first-hand accounts, and Acts isn't the history book we've been taught to believe. For instance, the writings concerning the apostle Paul in Acts at times contradict with Paul's own words in his letters to the Christian communities of faith he founded in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and what is now Greece and Turkey.

Our class has found this to be a fascinating study, and one way too complex to summarize in a sermon. Why do I even bring all this up? Because it is important. Because **one of the hallmarks of progressive Christianity**, as often expressed by the late Rev. Don Roulet, who taught here for years, is that **our faith must be intellectually honest, as well as personally relevant and socially responsible.** But that brings us back to the struggle to be inclusive. And that struggle is based in our inability to fully follow, as we heard in this morning's Gospel reading from John 15, Jesus' words, "This is my commandment, that you **love one another as I have loved you**" (v. 12). That means loving ALL others!

So, let's look briefly at what's going on in the 10th chapter of Acts. We heard in this morning's passage that a group of Jewish believers (we know they are Jewish because the author calls them "the circumcised believers") were astonished that a group of Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit after hearing Peter share the gospel with them. The author writes, "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." **Baptizing Gentiles into the Christian community of faith just wasn't done. So, this was a huge turning point in the development and spread of Christianity, when insiders were willing to include outsiders.** But as you might guess, this wasn't a smooth transition. Breaking down barriers of prejudice, injustice, and ignorance never is.

I encourage you to read the entire 10th chapter in the Book of Acts. It involves not only Peter but centers around a Gentile Roman military leader named Cornelius who was interested in the message of the gospel. The first part of the chapter, in fact, has been used throughout the ages to defend efforts to expand the circle of inclusiveness in our communities of faith. More recently, social and theological progressives in our denomination have used it as a basis in our efforts to include persons who identify as LGBTQ into the leadership, life and ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

You may be familiar with the **vision** that Peter had when he fell asleep up on a rooftop. "He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down...

In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, **'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'** This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven" (vv. 11-16). **Peter interpreted this vision as a message from God to expand his circle of inclusiveness to include Cornelius – and thus Gentiles. God had rearranged Peter's notions of clean and unclean, of what is profane and what is sacred. God can do the same for us.**

What at first seemed abhorrent to Peter, the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian community, became a focus of his ministry from that point forward. This, of course, became the mission of the apostle Paul, as well. This story informs us that the good news of God's inclusive love and grace crosses barriers and boundaries. "The umbrella of God's mercy," writes one biblical commentator, "is certainly a wide umbrella." Peter learns, as we need to be reminded at times, **"God shows no partiality"** (v. 34). God does not play favorites.

So, we are left with this challenge. **Who do you and I, who do we as a community of faith, still consider to be "outsiders," those "Gentiles" in our midst? Can we, like Peter, have a change of heart and mind (the theological word for this is repentance) and expand our circle of inclusiveness?**

With God's help, our mission is to build a truly inclusive community of faith, where everyone can find a place at the table. So, if need be, let's build a bigger table.

Amen.