

# Expanding Our Circle of Inclusiveness



Acts 10:34, 44-48    John 15:9-17  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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May 5, 2024

Our **College Hill Mission Statement** has three bullet points that help identify who we are and what we hope to accomplish. They act as important guides in the discernment process of our ministry efforts. They are:

- Build an inclusive community of faith
- Receive and openly share the love of God
- Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice

We will focus on the first one today, as evidenced by this sermon title, "Expanding Our Circle of Inclusion". To keep us humble, you have heard me mention on occasion throughout the years that **just because we identify ourselves as an inclusive congregation, especially from a social and theological perspective, doesn't mean that we are all-inclusive. Only God is all-inclusive, and we aren't God.** It serves, however, as **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 is calling us to be.

Perhaps it is a bit comforting, then, to know that efforts to be inclusive have been a struggle in the Christian movement since the very beginning. 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, following the laws of Moses. This divisive 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, they say, "We're a friendly congregation!" Unfortunately, at times that may only apply as being friendly with each other, being resistant to newcomers.

It doesn't take long for any visitor to get an internal sense of whether or not they would be fully welcomed. For that, I'd refer you to a sermon from two weeks ago focusing on the in-depth nature of developing a community of belonging. Or last Sunday's, which reminded us that we are the interweaving branches which are all connected to the same vine.

A sense of being unwelcome can be based on just about anything that distinguishes one individual, or group of persons, from another. We know the list: race, economic and social status, sexual orientation, gender identity, theological perspective, political leanings, level of education, and sometimes even based on marital status, physical condition, mental health, or even age. **Are there not individuals**

**or groups of people that we categorize as “the other?”** That, of course, varies from person to person, sometimes connecting to our upbringing, much of which was subconscious. Again, unlike God, do we not struggle with partiality and playing favorites? And no, that doesn't mean that everyone must be our friend, but it does mean extending a hand of genuine fellowship, hospitality, and respect – even if the other person doesn't respond in a like manner.

We must stay engaged in an intentional effort to counteract, at least at times, our own human nature to be wary of strangers, especially those we'd put into the category of being “not like ourselves”. Yet, in both the Old and New Testaments we are given the impression that the Hebrew nation, and later the Jews under Roman occupation, excluded, to a certain extent, those who were not Jewish. Of course, **a good portion of Christianity today in our nation, and yes here in Tulsa, also excludes those who are not Christian the way they are Christian, let alone people of different faith traditions, or of no faith tradition.**

We learn that the early Christian church had a hard time expanding their circle of inclusion. Their challenge is ours today. **What would it take to expand our circle of inclusion?** Our 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). I would add the command “love your neighbor as yourself” without forgetting the loving yourself part. **That means loving ALL others, recognizing that ALL people are children of God.**

Let's look now at what's going on in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the New Testament Book of Acts, believed to be written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. 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” – evidently no women were in the crowd that day) 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.”

**Recognizing the Sacred Presence of God, the Divine, dwelling within all others is a great first step in our efforts to expand our inclusion. And yes, we will run into those who believe the Spirit of God does not dwell within all people, that is until others believe what they believe. This is an excellent example of the difference between focusing on beliefs rather than focusing on faith, our trust in God.**

Historically, however, 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 – who then became welcomed insiders. But as you might guess, **this wasn't a smooth transition. Breaking down barriers of prejudice and ignorance and tradition never is. That also applies to us today.**

The portion of Acts 10 that was read today is preceded at the beginning of this same chapter with one of the most powerful examples of expanding the circle of inclusion. It involves Peter, but also centers around a Gentile Roman military leader named Cornelius, who was interested in the message of the gospel. The story goes like this. After talking with Cornelius, Peter goes up on the rooftop and falls asleep, which the scripture defines it as a trance, and he has a vision. “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 inclusion to include Cornelius – and thus Gentiles. **God had reinterpreted and redirected Peter's notions of clean and unclean, of what is profane and what is sacred. God can do the same for us, and that's a big part of our mission, ministry, and message here at College Hill. What some proclaim as profane may indeed be sacred.**

Social and theological progressives in our denomination used this story in our efforts to allow persons who openly identified as LGBTQ, including those in a relationship, into ordained leadership positions in the Presbyterian Church (USA). That successfully took place back in 2010 – part of the reason why College Hill affiliated with and identified itself as a **More Light Presbyterian congregation** a decade earlier. That milestone was followed by allowing same-sex marriage in 2014 – ten years ago now. I don't doubt that our United Methodist siblings also used this biblical story in their efforts, which just this week were finally successful in overturning their decades-long exclusion of LGBTQ pastors and same-sex marriage. But this was only achieved because over 25% of all United Methodist congregations in this country had already left the denomination, with their property, to form a new and strictly conservative denomination. Churches left the PC(USA) as well, but after, not before, we voted for inclusion.

This biblical story informs us that **the good news of God's inclusive love and grace crosses barriers, walls, and boundaries – the ones we, and organized religion, set up.** "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. **Like Peter, can we also have a change of heart and mind (the theological word for this is repentance) and expand our circle of inclusion?**

With God's help, our mission is to build a truly inclusive community of faith, where everyone can experience a sense of belonging, and know they have a place at the table. So if need be, as John Pavlovitz would state it, let's build a bigger table.

Amen.