

6th Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2024

Acts 10:44-48

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Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

If you had a chance to look at the May Newsletter that was sent out on Friday, you might have seen my lead article where I talked about what it means to be welcoming, especially of people who are different from us. I wrote that column in the context of our decision made at the January congregational meeting to begin a process of exploring whether we see that that kind of intentional welcoming as an important part of our mission as a congregation. Of course we are already welcoming, as was pointed out at that meeting. The question is, are we willing to be explicit about our welcome in ways that can be received by those who do fit our particular demographic?

It just so happens that our first reading this morning is part of a story that is all about a new understanding of whom God would have us welcome, a story that I think has everything to do with our discernment here at Grace. We get only the tail end of that story today. We also got another part of it on Easter Sunday, but again without the full context. Today's reading begins with verse 44, but I need to take you all the way back to the beginning of the chapter for you to appreciate what is going on here and how it relates to our other readings. The story starts with Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. But not just any Roman Centurion. Cornelius, we are told, feared God, prayed constantly, and gave alms to his Jewish neighbors. That is unusual and surprising behavior for a Gentile (Gentiles, remember are anyone who isn't Jewish, and let's also remember that Jesus and all of his disciples were Jewish.) Cornelius has a vision in which an angel appears to him and tells him send for Peter in Joppa, and listen to what he has to say. So he sends some of his men off to fetch Peter. In the meantime, as Cornelius' men are getting to Joppa, Peter has his own vision. In this vision he sees a sheet lowered from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals, animals that Jews are forbidden to eat. But a voice in this vision tells Peter to get up, kill, and eat. Peter says, "No, we're not allowed to eat these animals, and I have never eaten anything profane." This happens three times, and finally the voice says, "What God has made clean you must not call profane." But Peter sticks to his guns. He's going to be true to the traditions of his people.

Then Peter wakes up just as Cornelius' men arrive. Peter welcomes them, puts them up for the night, and then goes with them the next day to meet Cornelius. And all the while Peter is no doubt thinking about the vision he had and trying to put two and two together. Finally he meets Cornelius, who tells him about his vision, and that's when everything seems to click. Peter's vision wasn't about food. It was about the Gentiles. Peter had grown up believing that the Gentiles were second-class people at best, that God was not concerned with them. He had been taught that it was people like himself, Jews, who were God's chosen people, and that he should not associate or visit with Gentiles, and certainly not eat with them. Now he realizes that in his vision God was telling him that this needed to change, that no one is beyond God's concern, that nobody was second class. That's when Peter launches into his speech that we heard on Easter Sunday, where he talks about his realization that God makes no distinction among peoples, that Jesus salvation is for everyone equally.

What is remarkable about this story is that God does not announce a new policy, dropped from heaven on stone tablets. God first gives Peter and Cornelius separate visions, which on their own are incomplete, even incomprehensible in Peter's case. But then God gets them face to face

in each other's company and lets them figure out the implications of what God has been up to in Jesus, what his fulfilling of the scriptures by his death and resurrection was all about. Both Peter and Cornelius come to realize through this encounter that the God of Israel is the God of all people.

It's important to notice that Peter had to go out of his way to come to this new realization. He had to do something that was against his cultural norms and expectations, something that clearly made him uncomfortable. You can kind of tell he's uncomfortable, because when he arrives at Cornelius' house he says, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile," in other words, "You know that asking me to come to you goes against my people's rules." *But*, he says, God showed him that in Jesus the rules have now been changed.

So that's how the Gentiles were finally accepted on equal status with Jews in the early church, right? Not so fast. In the next chapter of Acts, chapter 11, Peter goes to Jerusalem and catches flack for what he has done. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" So Peter tells them the story of chapter 10. There's lots of repetition in chapter 11. And when Peter finishes his story, the Jewish Christians who had been criticizing stopped criticizing and began praising God. They came to the same realization as Peter.

I'd like to tell you that *that* was the end of the matter. But it wasn't. It took a while for this new understanding to sink in. In the Book of Acts, that finally happens in chapter 15. Now I want to be clear, that it wasn't that Gentiles were completely excluded by the first Christians. They weren't. But the understanding was that Gentiles had to change to be a part of the church, to become like the Jewish Christians. They needed to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. In Acts 15 the church leaders gathered and finally decided that Gentiles did *not* have to change to become Jews in order to be included in the church. But even that was not the end of the matter. We know that it continued to be an issue in the early church because Paul still had to address it some twenty years later in his letter to the Galatians.

When you know this whole story, I think it's not hard to make connections to our own context. I think Peter's realization about the Gentiles is a realization that is meant to be ours as well in regard to the groups of people we have traditionally excluded from the church in our time. The vision we are given through our encounters with God in worship and prayer centered in the scriptures and the gospel of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – this vision is given concrete shape and form in the people God places in our path. God's love, forgiveness, and reconciliation are meant not only for us, but they are meant to be realized through us, calling us to love and to be reconciled with people we may never have expected to love and be reconciled with. If Peter, himself forgiven and reconciled to God by Jesus, can come to care for the likes of Cornelius, and if the early church can welcome newcomers without insisting that they change who they are, then what are the possibilities for you and me? Who might we come to care for that we never thought possible? God only knows. And God only can make it happen. So may God continue to give us the vision, the courage, and the faith to be open to the Spirit and to all who bear the image of God. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in our Christ Jesus, because Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)