

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
May 13, 2012
Acts 10:44-48
John 15:9-17

“A Barrier Breaking God”

The issue of gay rights has been front and center this week. Between Obama announcing he is now in favor of gay marriage to Amendment 1 becoming law in North Carolina, the issue of how far people are willing to extend civil rights has been front page news. And while all of this was happening, the United Methodist Church chose to keep in their Book of Discipline a phrase that calls homosexual activity “incompatible with Christian teaching”. When a group protested that move, the President of the Council of Bishops implored the protestors to stay with the church and even quoted scripture to them, from Philippians 2:1-5, which says: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”

When I read that statement, I must say the irony of pitting scripture against scripture when it comes to how we should treat other people was not lost on me. And, I couldn't help but wonder, “Well, what exactly would the mindset of Christ be in this situation?” Would Christ side with the majority of people who want the policy to remain in place, or would he side with the protestors, who want equal rights? It's that old WWJD question. What would Jesus do? Or perhaps the better question is, “Who would Jesus discriminate against?”

That question, by the way, was posed by Jay Michaelson, author of “God v. Gay: The Religious Case for Equality”, when he stated in an article that Obama's announcement regarding marriage was actually an inspiring religious pronouncement because it was “a model of religious reasoning.” He went on to write: “This process (of changing one's mind) is about the growth of individual conscience. Affirming the equality of LGBT people, including same-sex marriage, is not a choice between religion and some other values, between God and gay. It is, on the contrary, a direct consequence of taking religion seriously. It's easy to sit back comfortably with one's assumptions and prejudices. What's harder, and thus what really counts, religiously speaking, is to be open to what other people and their experiences have to teach us.”

That statement couldn't dovetail better with today's reading from Acts in which Peter says to the gathered crowd, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” In other words, who are we to judge who is worthy of God's acceptance and who is not? If Cornelius the gentile wants to be baptized, then baptized he shall be.

Peter's words conclude the story about Peter and his encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman centurion who was the leader of 100 Roman soldiers. In Peter's day and age, no one was considered more of an outsider to a faithful Jew like Peter than a guy like

Cornelius. The two did not make small talk in polite company. It was forbidden by Jewish law. There were clearly defined boundaries between who was acceptable to God and who was not, and Cornelius was not.

But because of a series of visions and dreams, Cornelius and Peter meet. Peter goes to Caesarea at the request of Cornelius because Cornelius has had a vision that instructs him to send for Peter. Well, at the same time Cornelius is having his vision, Peter's having one of his own, in which he is told not to call profane anything God makes clean. And no sooner does his vision come to an end than Cornelius' Italian Cohort show up at his door asking him to come to dinner.

Now, if it hadn't of been for Peter's vision in which God tells him that it's not up to him to decide what's kosher and what's not, Peter would not have eaten dinner with those men, because it was unlawful for a Jew to eat with a Gentile. But Peter, having had that vision of God telling him that, "You know what Peter, I'm going to call the shots on what's kosher and what's not," Peter decides that it's OK to eat at Cornelius' house.

Now, if the story had ended there, it would have been fine and good and everyone would have made nice small talk over dinner, which was certainly leaps and bounds ahead of where they were at the beginning of chapter 10. But in that story, at the end of dinner, Peter declares to Cornelius and his entourage that God shows no partiality. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," Peter states.

That is a very bold statement for Peter to make, because up until now he has believed that God shows partiality, that God plays favorites. His religion and scriptures and laws were a major reason he felt that way. But over the course of time, he began to see things differently. Why? Because he met people like Cornelius and because he remembered what Jesus had taught him. But also because the Holy Spirit kept nudging him along, poking and prodding at him and working in a powerful way to transform his thoughts and actions and beliefs. And when Peter finally woke up to the Spirit's prodding, he realized he couldn't sit back any longer with his old, tired assumptions and prejudices. He needed to do something different, he needed to take a stand and declare to everyone who was gathered there that he had changed his mind because life experiences and the Holy Spirit told him it was time.

After Peter baptizes Cornelius, he has to go to Jerusalem and defend himself in front of the church leaders. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them," they demand to know. And Peter explains to them his visions and what he saw in them and concludes by saying, "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

I wonder, where in our world and our country and community today do we hinder God? In what ways do we hinder God's activity?

Peter's statements in this story are a big contrast to many of the religions many strands of Christianity around today where God is constantly assumed to be on someone's side. People are very good and very adept at claiming that God is on their side. We hear this

from politicians; we hear it from political parties; from people promoting their social cause or speaking against one; and even from nations who just know God is on *their side*. But when we do that, and I believe that people on all sides do it—liberals and conservatives—we hinder God's activity and we close ourselves off to what the Holy Spirit might be teaching us today. Rather than being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, we circle the wagons, proclaiming that we know who is in and who is out, we know what's right and what's wrong, or we know what God really wants or doesn't want. Peter circled the wagons; the leaders in Jerusalem circled the wagons; the Romans circled the wagons. But the Spirit kept pushing them and working through them despite their resistance to transform them and their communities. And because of that, the boundaries of the inner circle kept widening to the point that the assumed boundaries were no longer legitimate. Christianity moved in a way no one ever expected, especially Peter. What Peter did changed the course of Christianity forever. He opened this new religion to the whole world. None of us would be here if Peter and Cornelius had closed their minds to the movement of the Spirit.

When Peter declared, "God shows no partiality," he opened the possibility that anyone—everyone—is welcome in the family of faith. But he also put us on warning: who are we to hinder God? Who are we to withhold the water for baptism? Who are we to stand in the way of God's love? (Rev. David Lewicki, www.odysseynetworks.org, "Holy Calamity")

At the end of his life, Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another just as he had loved them. Love one another, he said, love one another. He tells them this in John's Gospel, the part we heard earlier.

For John, love isn't something that we feel; love is something we do. Love is an action, not a feeling. Which means we love one another when we treat other people fairly, as equals. Love is something we enact when we emulate Jesus' actions. Love is something we embody when we allow the Spirit to move in and through us and our communities, breaking down the barriers and boundaries that divide us. This love Jesus commands doesn't mean we need to approve, condone, understand or even like the other person or his or her actions, but it is a love that says we'll treat another person fairly and as we would like to be treated.

I suspect when Peter was having misgivings about meeting and eating with Cornelius, those final words of Jesus played in his head. "Love one another as I have loved you." I have no way of knowing that, of course, but I have a hunch Peter remembered those words and maybe in that decisive moment of telling Cornelius and his cohort to stay or go, those words came to him and he asked himself, "What would Jesus do?" And decided that Jesus would have opened the door, and invited them in, and broke bread with them. Because in all those years of following him, he never once saw him say, "You're not worthy." Or, "I can't eat with you, that's not allowed." No, in all those years, Peter never once heard Jesus say those things. In fact, Peter saw Jesus eat with some of the lowest of the low, some real-riff. So, I imagine in that split second, when he

had to make up his mind about eating with Cornelius or not, Peter decided, “if it’s good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.”

And because of that, we are here. We, too, have been invited to the table. God accepts us Gentiles for who we are.

And so I ask you to consider today the matters your mind is closed to. And where might the Spirit be leading you? Because it's easy to sit back comfortably with one's assumptions and prejudices. What's harder is to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and allowing her to transform us into the people God calls us to be.

Amen.

Sources:

Rev. David Lewicki, www.odysseynetworks.org, “Holy Calamity”

www.huffingtonpost.com, Jay Michaelson, “Obama’s Same Sex Marriage Announcement: A Victory for Religion”, May 9, 2012

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, commentary on Acts 10:44-48