Pushing the Boundaries, Part 2

Acts 10

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Human beings everywhere seem to have a particular gift for dividing people into groups based on ridiculous things. Don’t get me started on blond jokes (I once was actually quite blond!), which are Mickey Mouse compared to the ways we divide on race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, etc. Stuff that doesn’t matter in terms of our ability to be in relationship with one another. It still astounds me that the White Christian Nationalist movement claims that no one who is not white and Christian belongs in this country, whose land white Christians stole from people who were not white or Christian.

I know Dr. Seuss has been in the news lately for ways a couple of his books perpetuated stereotypes that divide, but one of his later books nails the ridiculousness of how we divide ourselves from others. In the Sneetches, two groups of critters divide based on whether their bellies have stars or not. The absolute idiocy of this becomes clear when an entrepreneur profits from their prejudice by selling treatments in his machine to put stars on people’s bellies. At which point the ones who already have stars want their taken off so they can continue to make sure they are not confused with the new star people, who look just like them.

God, of course, thinks these divisions are false, ridiculous, and dangerous. And, in this amazing story in the book of Acts, God does a ridiculous thing to try to get Peter to understand how unnecessary divisions are between people based on traditions. I love Peter, because, like most of us, Peter has moments of greatness and moments when his flaws are exposed. One of those flaws was that he somehow missed all those times when Jesus reached out to people who were not Jewish to heal or teach or welcome. As the early church came together, Peter was convinced that only people who were Jews could be Christians. So, God sends Peter a vision. Peter’s praying on the roof, and as he prays, he sees a large sheet coming out of the sky. On the sheet is a veritable menagerie of animals considered by Jewish dietary laws to be unclean, unfit to be eaten. But a voice instructs Peter to kill and eat what’s on the sheet. Because Peter is being dense, God has to do this three times, and Peter still can’t figure out what is going on!

Then he gets an invitation to visit Cornelius, a Roman soldier, who lived far enough away that Peter was going to have to stay with Cornelius, which, because Cornelius was not Jewish and therefore his food would be unclean, Peter felt he could not do. But because the messengers said an angel was involved in this invite, Peter felt that he maybe had no choice.

In many Bibles, this story is labeled, “The Conversion of Cornelius.” Which is only half of the story. The first half is clearly “The Conversion of Peter.” As he listens to Cornelius, the point of the weird vision suddenly becomes clear. Peter says, in The Message translation, “Nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open.”

Nothing could be plainer. And yet. Even within Christianity, divisions based on a whole variety of things, from theological differences to ethnicity to power plays have divided the church almost from the very beginning. Let alone our relationships with those of other faiths. If you haven’t yet watched the PBS series on the Black Church, I highly commend it to you. You will learn, if you didn’t already know it, that several Protestant denominations divided over the question of whether black people who loved God and sought to follow God should be allowed in their churches and allowed to lead churches. And right here in Connecticut, numerous churches’ white leaders restricted the ability of black worshippers to truly participate in church, such that those black members had to leave and form their own churches. Because their skin had a different color. I thought Peter had already figured this out. But we have willfully forgotten what he learned in his time at Cornelius’ house. A reminder that Paul would make clear later: In Christ there is no male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, for all are one.

God doesn’t just push the boundaries; God tears them down. In place of walls, God builds tables for eating together and fills every vessel that can be found with water for baptism. Did you catch it? This story ends just like the one we heard last week about Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, with a call for baptism. The Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the good news, and this time it is the converted Peter who cries out that all should be baptized. In the baptismal waters, Cornelius and his family become co-equal kindred in Christ with Peter and his companions. And so, they eat and drink together, remembering Jesus, celebrating that dividing walls have been torn down, because they were ridiculous and unnecessary. How wonderful!

Today, let us remember our baptisms, and that in those baptisms we are made one, literally made one, with all those who have been baptized. That identity supersedes any other identity we might claim. In a few minutes, we will eat the meal Jesus gifted us, remembering that we become the body of Christ as we eat and drink. Today, I invite you also to have a bowl of water with you at your table, so that you may remember your baptism. And every time you feel yourself inclined to divide yourself from someone else for any reason, touch your head and remember that baptism, remember Peter and Cornelius, Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, and celebrate that you don’t need to divide yourself from anyone else. Thanks be to God!