

Beyond the Boundaries

Acts 11:1-18

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Do you remember the 1967 film “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” The movie starred Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn as Mr. and Mrs. Drayton, an upper-middle class, Roman Catholic, Caucasian couple struggling with their ideas about race and love after their daughter brings home her black fiancé, Dr. John Wade Prentice (played by Sidney Poitier). The film won two Oscars. The movie was a fascinating insight into the difficulty of dislodging long held beliefs and prejudices. Confronting entrenched attitudes about race in America is threatening and disturbing. It is one thing to hold a grand worldview of inclusiveness but quite another to accept someone of another race, nationality, or class into your own family. That’s where the “rubber meets the road.” Who will be accepted at your dinner table?

The story of Peter and Cornelius is a story of expanding vision and prejudice confronted. Cornelius is arguably the first Gentile welcomed into the family of faith; the first non-Jewish family to be baptized. But it was not the baptism that had the early Church in turmoil. It was dinner! “Why do you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” asked the Jewish believers of Peter when he returned to Jerusalem. A parallel today might be a Palestinian hosting a Jewish soldier in the West Bank, or an Afghan inviting a Marine to dinner with the extended family. The fact that Peter ate with them triggered this particular inquisition. The incident is just dripping with political and racial tension.

Imagine for a moment just how difficult it must have been for these Jewish Christians, raised as they were with the belief that purity was of the highest value. They were set apart from the surrounding Gentiles and their filthy ways, by their diet and their style of worship – and now they had to rethink everything! Peter was led by God to receive Cornelius, a centurion, into the faith, baptizing him in the name of Jesus Christ. Who would invite one of those from the occupying force in their country to sit at table fellowship and stay with the family for several days? Surely God was up to something new and it was barrier breaking!

Maybe God is up to something new in your life today? Maybe some pattern of thinking about the world, some ideology you hold that is ripe with political or racial tension is in need of change? Perhaps our community of faith is in need of an attitude adjustment like that of Peter and Cornelius?

Yesterday's *Los Angeles Times* had an article entitled, "Unity in Worship" about two large congregations worshiping together in downtown LA.. One Pentecostal, mostly African American, the other the largest Latino evangelical church in the city. Just four blocks from one another on Crenshaw Boulevard in South LA., 1,500 believers from both churches gathered at what organizers called, "a historic attempt to overcome black-brown differences through shared faith and a sacred covenant to jointly address violence, poverty, and health problems that afflict both communities."¹ Christian faith brings people together. Christian history is filled with the memory of people of faith reaching out across the divisions and distinctions in language, dress, lifestyle, and style of worship to build one community dedicated to Jesus Christ. We don't all look alike or come from the same background but we are all going in the same direction - to the same destination, believing in the same Savior and nourished at the same table – the table of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That which holds us together in faith is more powerful than that which separates and divides us though, sadly, churches have too often been divided over petty differences. It is a difficult lesson to learn for some because it requires a whole new way of thinking.

That we are more connected to one another more than we know was recently illustrated by a story in *The Washington Post* about a genealogical study which surprisingly revealed the interconnectedness of two prominent public figures.² Al Sharpton, the fiery, African American activist from New York, learned that his great-grandfather was a slave (not so surprising) and that he was owned by relatives of the late Senator Strom Thurmond, a one-time segregationist (very surprising). "It was probably the most shocking thing in my life," Sharpton said. You may remember that following Thurmond's death in 2003, a 78-year-old retired school teacher, Essie Mae Washington-Williams revealed that she was the off-spring of Strom Thurmond's extra-marital affair with his family's black housekeeper. "In the story of the Thurmonds and the Sharptons is the story of the shame and the glory of America," said Sharpton.

¹ Watanabe, Teresa, "Unity in Worship," *Los Angeles Times*, Saturday May 1, 2010 Latextra AA

² Shulman, Robin, "Sharpton's Ancestor Was Owned by Thurmond's", *The Washington Post*, Monday, Feb. 26, 2007)

The story of Peter and Cornelius is a story of both the shame and the glory of Christian faith. It is a story of redefining who is “in” and who is “out”; who is “us” and who is “them;” who is “included” and who is “excluded” from the family meals of those who believe in Christ. I say that it is both the shame and the glory of Christian faith because the dream of God revealed to Peter has yet to be realized! We persist in dividing the world into “us” and “them” along racial and ethnic and national lines. But God seems to be leading us towards a new perspective!

The early Church came to the conclusion rather quickly that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not only for those who had been waiting for it (for the Messiah) among the Jews. No, the Gospel was for everyone – everywhere! The old racial and class boundaries, the old national and gender exclusions, the old ways of thinking and structuring the world in terms of “us” and “them” were tossed out the window. A new kind of community,, a new kind of humanity, and a new way of relating in the world was emerging. When Peter finally found his voice and began to speak, he put it this way, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”³

In other words, this Lord Jesus, this Messiah, is not just Lord of the Jews, he is Lord of all! Makes no difference if your black or white, rich or poor, male or female, are able bodied or disabled, have almond shaped eyes and back hair or blue eyes and blond hair. Jesus, the Christ is Lord of all!

This was a troubling development for the early Church and caused no small amount of criticism of Peter and Paul and others. In fact, Paul describes an encounter in Galatians where he confronted Peter on this very subject of eating with Gentiles. He writes, “I opposed him to his face . . . he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after (certain people came from James), he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel I opposed him.”⁴ This truth was tumultuous in the early Church and it was unprecedented. And yes, there were factions in the early Church too! This Lord, this faith, this God shows no partiality! It’s interesting that this same phrase is found in Galatians 2. Paul was confronting the duplicity of saying one thing and behaving in a contradictory way.

³ Acts 10:34

⁴ Galatians 2:11-14

You mean it is possible to become Christian without actually first becoming Jewish? You mean all those things we have been told since our earliest days — the world is full of clean and unclean things and people, we must keep ourselves pure, first by avoiding the unclean through strict adherence to dietary laws, we must avoid the people who are defiled — all this is misguided? These prohibitions are well known and all found in Leviticus.

This was a radically different way of looking at the world and life. Both Peter and Cornelius had to change their thinking. Both are relatively passive in the story. It is God who is leading them both to a new understanding. They belong together in the family of faith because they are both recipients of the same grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I wonder if we apply that same standard (the truth of the Gospel) to our attitudes and behaviors, today, if we might not be found to be excluding those who are also recipients of the same grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. What issues are just dripping with racial and political tensions today that faith in Christ compels us to see differently? If God shows no partiality, what does that mean for us as we face difficult and complex issues like immigration? Does faith in the Christ who broke through barriers inform your position?

Two mornings a week here at the church, we have an important ministry in the community. Our Conversational English ministry has about 35 students, mostly native Mandarin Chinese speakers, but some Cantonese and even Korean speakers. They are all learning how to better use the English language. This ministry has been in place for 17 years. Despite the longevity and success of the program, each year it is difficult to find members of the church able to volunteer their time teaching English to our newest neighbors. Thanks to the dedication of Ruth Wu, Chuck and Yoshi Hahn, and Marie Melrose this ministry continues but they need our help. If you know English, you know all you need to know to assist in teaching.

Though the students are comfortable in our buildings, they have not participated in our worship life. Why is that? There are surely a number of good explanations but I can't help but wonder; is it possible we're not really interested in inviting them to the Lord's Table? Are we content merely to maintain a service for them but not extend full fellowship? From our largess we are willing to offer our help (to the "less fortunate") yet are we not really prepared to extend the hand of brotherhood? I wonder, maybe we are more like the movie characters Mr. and Mrs. Drayton than we want to admit! And maybe it's time we change the way we think about one another and the way we approach ministry in our pluralizing and changing community.

We need to look at the world and all of life the way God does - without partiality, without categorizing the “insiders and outsiders.” The Church of Jesus Christ is where this dream of God’s was first proclaimed and where our ancestors of faith came together and joined in table fellowship with those they previously thought didn’t belong under the same tent. At the heart of the Christian Gospel is the claim that Jesus Christ is Lord of all! And therefore, we can treat each other, and all people, with honor and respect as children of God. The shame is that in the church we often don’t offer the world an expanded vision but instead, we engage in endless internal bickering. The glory is that we worship a Lord who is leading us to think differently about others. And the world desperately needs a new vision of how to live with one another just now.

Toleration isn’t enough. We must be willing to go further and sit at table and break bread together, as brothers and sisters in Christ without distinctions. And so we come to this, the Lord’s Table. All those who humbly put their trust in Christ, who are truly sorry for their sins and desire to be delivered from the burden of them, are invited and encouraged to come to this table. Let us so come that we might find refreshment for our souls. Amen.

Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.