

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Elizabeth H. Doolin  
Sunday, May 15, 2022

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Just before our passage today, we hear the story of Peter visiting the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, at his home in Caesarea. Their visit comes at the request of Cornelius, who sees and hears a vision of an angel telling him to invite Peter into his home. Prior to their visit, Peter also has a vision recounted in today's passage, which ultimately leads Peter to accept the invitation of Cornelius. This visit between Peter and Cornelius is significant not just because there are multiple visions involved in it, but because what these visions reveal about overcoming social barriers. Luke tells us in Acts that for a Jew to visit the home of Gentile is forbidden. While this may not have been the case everywhere, it is possible that Cornelius's station as a Roman officer made him a particularly forbidden association. In their visit, we see Cornelius, a Roman officer of ample rank and status, bow to Peter, a Jewish disciple of Jesus; and then we hear Peter reveal to Cornelius his vision of God's inclusion of all people, including the Gentiles. Their visit ends with the descent of the Holy Spirit on all who were gathered at the home of Cornelius, with people speaking in tongues, and then being baptized by Peter. After all this we are told that Peter was invited to stay at the home of Cornelius for several days. Today's scripture begins following Peter's visit to Cornelius, having returned to his friends in Jerusalem. Listen now for God's word to us this day:

### **Acts 11:1-18**

*Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying,*

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*and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.[b] These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

A couple of weeks ago I was reading over the passages in today's lectionary, trying to decide which scripture I should preach on. I was drawn to this message of inclusion that Peter shares with his friends, declaring that the work of the Holy Spirit is big enough that Gentiles and Jews

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alike are welcome in the Kingdom of God. It's a beautiful story and message of the expansive nature of God's love.

And then I found myself at a loss. I was staring at my computer. I was reading over commentaries. I was racking my brain for illustrations of what inclusion looks like in practice, especially in a place like Idlewild that has done a lot of work to be a church where all might find a home. I found myself wondering if there was anything worth saying about inclusion that hasn't already been said.

I think part of my challenge is that this idea, that Christ calls us to be a community of welcome and inclusion, is actually much harder than it sounds. We hear in Acts that it was hard for the earliest followers of Christ. They could not imagine broadening their community to include folks who did not practice the same religious and social rituals as them. It might seem like a trivial thing from our perspective, but for their community the practices of circumcision and dietary restrictions were important community markers signaling their devotion to God. Extending the circle of religious community to those who did not follow the same rituals and traditions was not something they could take lightly.

And when it came to extending that invitation to a Roman centurion, there would have been an additional layer of complexity. These early followers of Christ would not have forgotten that it was a Roman cross on which he was killed. Broadening the circle of their community to include someone like him would not just mean a crossing of social norms, but welcoming in someone whose rank and status reflected that of the government responsible for crucifying their Lord.

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This kind of inclusion is one that was challenging for Peter's community, just as it challenges us today. We know of Christ's command to welcome and include the vulnerable and marginalized - the children, the widows, the poor, and the sick. Welcoming those on the margins was certainly a hard thing then as it is now. This is a message we are familiar with. We may struggle with the ins and outs of *how* to do it, but including those who are most vulnerable is a message that we consistently hear and recognize as central to the story of the gospel. So what do we do with the welcome of a Roman centurion and his friends? People in positions of power, who were known for abusing that power in some of the cruelest ways imaginable?

Several weeks ago I was invited to help lead the confirmation class as they learned about the sacraments. We were talking about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and how everyone is welcome at the Table, because God loves everybody - no exceptions. We were talking about how in the Lord's Supper we experience Christ's love both personally and collectively with Christians around the world who share in the sacrament. As we were talking about the wideness of God's love expressed in this sacrament,, one of our confirmands asked the question - "How can God love me, and Vladimir Putin? That doesn't make sense. That doesn't seem fair."

Our youth have good questions y'all. I'm pretty sure I fumbled through some kind of unsatisfactory response about God's love being so much bigger than we can imagine and not adhering to our human ideas of love. These things are true: God's love is far beyond what we can fathom. But when we look at today's text, we see that Peter responds to this kind of question in a different way. When his friends question him about going into the home of Cornelius, and eating with Gentiles, Peter does not respond with a theological treatise. He just tells them the story of his vision, and how it led him to accept the invitation to this home. He tells them that the same

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Holy Spirit that fell upon them, leading them to repentance and baptism. Peter does not pretend to understand what has happened, but he understands that God is at work in the lives of the Gentiles just as God is at work in the lives of his own community. We don't know if Peter even likes these new believers, but he accepts that the Holy Spirit has called them. "Who was I that I could hinder God?" - he asks.

Who could hinder God? The God of all creation, who our psalm from today asks even the sea monsters, and hail, wind, and fire to praise. If God could create all these things and more, then how could God not touch the hearts of Gentiles as well. Peter does not point to his own ideas when confronted by his friends; he simply offers his understanding of the truth of God's revelation to him through this vision, and humbly accepts the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in communities beyond on his own. Of this question that Peter asks, "Who am I that I could hinder God," Presbyterian pastor Joseph Harvard writes, "Every time we exclude someone from full participation in the redemptive efforts of God, Peter's questions should trouble us and the church. Peter was persuaded that God the creator did not intend to exclude anyone from the community of God's care. His conclusion was revolutionary."

I love this quote from Reverend Harvard on the revolutionary nature of God's inclusion. But I do want to pause here, because there's a point I want to be clear about, that I don't want getting lost in this message. Just because God is capable of a love far beyond our own, a love that includes even people who have done reprehensible things, does not mean that we do not hold people accountable for their actions. God's call for love and mercy does not cancel out God's call to justice. When we see people doing reprehensible things, like the white supremacist who took the lives of ten innocent people at supermarket in Buffalo yesterday afternoon, we

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condemn these actions, and the ideology that fueled them. We grieve this unexcusable hate and violence, and know that God grieves it too.

We know that there are times when certain actions make reconciliation impossible, and peace can only be achieved through separation. The message in our passage today isn't one that says that anything goes, but it does reveal the power of the Holy Spirit, and God's desire for inclusion and unity when it might lead to the flourishing of Christian community.

At the end of today's passage, we hear Peter's friends, following a stunned silence, comment that God has given even the Gentiles a *repentance* that leads to life. This repentance is a key feature of what it means to be a part of Christian community, and it is why we make it a point to confess our sins both communally and individually every week in worship. Acknowledging aloud the ways in which we have failed, and asking for God's help in doing better, is essential to being the body of Christ.

As you heard last week when our confirmands accepted membership into the church, the first question they were asked was "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" My attempt at explaining this question during the confirmation retreat was "With God's help, do your best." All of us are going to fail. We know that, and God knows that. And this is the first thing we acknowledge as we accept new members into the church. But we also ask that members of our community try their best to live their lives as followers of Christ.

What we then go on to ask is not about any of the social categories they might fall into. It is not where they come from, who their families are, how much money they have, or their IQ score - but is simply their commitment to Jesus Christ. Are you willing to follow Christ, and

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willing to serve the church. Has the Holy Spirit placed this calling on your life, and do you accept it. We ask nothing more to be a member of the church than this. Will you love God, and love God's people. That's the criteria.

It's not an easy calling to accept. But it is a calling that the Holy Spirit opens to include any and all, and it is what makes the church the body of Christ.

May it be so, and may we welcome all who seek to follow the Holy Spirit's call on their lives. Amen.