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“Radical Inclusion”

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6th Sunday of Easter (Year B)

May 6, 2018

John 15:9-17, Acts 10:44-48

In this world, there are insiders and there are outsiders. Most of us have, at some point in our lives, been an insider - part of the club, the team, the neighborhood, included, accepted, welcomed, and loved. Most of us have also, at some point in our lives, been an outsider - unwelcomed, excluded, shamed, and unloved.

When we are insiders, we know the rules of the game. We know what it takes to stay on the inside. We know what to do and what not to do. If we step outside of the boundaries, we may find ourselves on the outside looking in.

As outsiders, we also know the rules of the game. We know that, for some reason or another, we don't fit into the built-in parameters. We are not athletic enough to make the sports team. We are not wealthy enough to join the club. We are not smart enough to be in the top of the class. Our skin is not the right shade, our body is not the right shape, our sexuality or gender identity is not the norm, our politics are not the most popular. For whatever reason, we are outsiders.

In the city of Joppa, now a suburb of Tel Aviv, hundreds of years ago, culture and religion defined who would be insiders and outsiders. The people preaching the message of Jesus were doing so in the context of their own

religious heritage and culture – the Jewish one. The message of Jesus, who was a Jew, was just for the insiders, God’s chosen ones, the Jews.

Peter, Jesus’ disciple and leader in the early church, knew this more than anyone, perhaps. God knew that he knew it, and God knew that he was wrong. In today’s incredible story of transformation, God shows Peter what God wants and Peter, listening to God’s voice and open to God’s guidance, gets it.

In the longer narrative of Acts 10, Cornelius is the first one God speaks to, telling him through an angel to send his men to Joppa to fetch Peter. Cornelius, remember, is a devout man who gave alms generously and prayed constantly to God. He had a close relationship with God, but he was a Gentile, unclean in innumerable ways according to Jewish law, and that meant he was an outsider. Peter never would have considered stepping inside his Caesarean home, where Jewish food and cleanliness laws were not kept. But God gave Cornelius a clear message, so Cornelius sent his messengers to ask Peter to come to Caesarea.

God sent a different kind of message to Peter in the form of a giant sheet coming down from heaven. It’s hard to imagine what that must have looked like, filled with all kinds of unclean animals. It’s hard to imagine what in the world Peter was *thinking* at that moment. But it is interesting to me that he was on the roof praying, got hungry, must have gone down and put his order in to the kitchen staff, came back up and started praying again, trying to ignore his grumbling tummy, when this sheet comes down out of heaven, filled with all the things he was forbidden to eat – pigs, camels, rabbits, rock badgers, birds, reptiles and the like – all the things forbidden from Leviticus 11. And when the sheet lands in front of Peter, God says, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”

To be honest, Peter must have been absolutely disgusted by the thought of doing such a thing. Maybe he thought it was a test, because he immediately says, “No way, Lord. I’ve never eaten anything like that before!” But God, as always, is patient with Peter and lets him know that things are a little different now, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” The message came to Peter three times (things always seem to happen to him in threes!) and still left him scratching his head.

Meanwhile, Cornelius' men, these Gentiles from Caesarea, show up to fetch Peter. Peter is still trying to figure that vision out when the Spirit comes to him again and tells Peter about Cornelius' men and tells Peter to go with them without hesitation, for, the Spirit says, "I have sent them."

Now Peter is really confused. Go with the Gentiles? What in the world for? And because it is dark already and the men are tired and hungry, Peter invites them to stay for the night. The next morning, though, they set out – Peter, a few friends from Joppa, and Cornelius' men - and in two days, they reach Caesarea. I would love to know what they talked about on that trip!!

By the time they get to Caesarea and to Cornelius' house, crowded now with invited and interested Gentiles, Peter has finally put two and two together. He says something like this – "Now you know I shouldn't be here. You know under normal circumstances I would NEVER associate with you guys. But something has changed. God told me that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean. So here I am. Why is it then that you sent for me?"

Then Cornelius tells Peter of his own vision from God. When he is finished, Peter says (and this is my favorite line in the story!), "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." And Peter shares with all present the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He shares with passion and undeniable faith. And the people who heard him believed. Peter preached God's message of healing power, love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ and the *Gentiles* believed. Here is where our "official" text for today comes in. Listen now to God's word:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers (*that is, the Jews*)¹ who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? So he ordered

¹ Italics mine

them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. (Acts 10:44-48)

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” In other words, Peter says in front of Jew and Gentile alike, “I was wrong. God is right and now we know. These people have received the Holy Spirit by the grace of God and they have just as much right as anyone to receive the waters of baptism.” Sound familiar? In an earlier story in the book of Acts, we hear about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, another outsider who hears and believes the message of Christ. The Ethiopian eunuch sees water and shouts out, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Maybe rules and regulations. Maybe cultural norms. Maybe biases and prejudices. Maybe exclusive insider club rules. Maybe fear or even hatred. But not God. Not the Holy Spirit. Not the message of Jesus. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?” Sure. Plenty can and plenty will, but can any who truly stand before God as servants of grace withhold the water for baptizing those who believe? Not on your life. Not on your life. God has opened the floodgates that all might come in. God has sent Jesus as a light to the nations. Not just to the “insiders.” Not just to the ones who keep a set of prescribed rules. But to those who believe in Jesus and trust God, to those who turn to God with hearts open wide to receive direction and guidance, to receive grace and mercy, to receive a love that is forgiving, unchanging, unconditional, and unlimited.

Friends, our culture, our history, our fears and anxieties, and any number of other things too often keep us pushing hard against those floodgates of grace to keep them closed. Too many of those on the inside are afraid, really, of what will happen if we let them fall open. Too many press hard against these gates and make rules that keep the insiders in and the outsiders out. Women are excluded. LGBTQ people are excluded. Immigrants and refugees are excluded. Black and brown people are excluded. Children are excluded. The formerly incarcerated are excluded. But don't you see? Don't we all claim this together? That these exclusions are not of God. “I now see,” said Peter, “that God show no partiality!” All who trust in him are welcomed into his arms of grace.

The gates of God that open us to a full relationship with God in Christ are wide open. Wide open. So if the church, global or local, has made you feel like an outsider in *any* way, may she seek forgiveness and may she set her eyes on Christ and be radically changed, just as Peter was radically changed so many years ago. And may the world, our nation, our state, and our communities also be changed so as to participate in the radical inclusion of God. Let the floodgates of God's grace and mercy open wide – that all might come in. In the Kingdom of God, there are no outsiders. We are all inside the arms of God's inclusive and unconditional love.

Alleluia. Amen.

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