

Sixth Sunday of Easter: "A Big Tent"

ACTS 10:34-43

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Happy Easter! Today is the sixth Sunday of the Easter season, and we continue our Easter season series: **LEARNING AND LIVING RESURRECTION.**

On Easter Sunday, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus—the one who was put to death, and according to the Bible, was raised from the dead by God.



Regardless of how you interpret the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, Easter is the proclamation of good news that sin is forgiven and new life is possible. Resurrection means new life.

So in this seven-week season of Easter, we're looking at different themes, especially in the book of Acts, to help us understand resurrection and Easter better, to help learn and live resurrection. In previous weeks you've heard:

KINGDOM: Resurrection means we are part of God's Kingdom, God's realm, God's new reality, God's *basileia* (the Greek word)

CHANGE: Resurrection means changing our minds, changing actions, changing our lives.

AWAKE: Resurrection means we are awake to the life that God has given us.

COMMUNITY: Resurrection means we need each other.

Today, our focus is on inclusion, on how God's love is for everyone, how the good news of the gospel tears down the walls that divide us. At least it's supposed to tear down those walls. We are all pretty good at rebuilding them.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall." So begins Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" in which the speaker and neighbor rebuild their wall, although the speaker doesn't think the wall is necessary. The poem recognizes that sometimes walls are helpful, but not always.

We humans sadly build walls of exclusion for all sorts of reasons.

In Acts 10, we learn of an encounter between a Gentile Roman centurion and the Jewish Christian apostle Peter. According to the Law, such encounters were forbidden for Jews. But God brought them together, and from that encounter, Peter learns more about the wall-breaking love of God.

Listen for God's word:

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

I want to tell you about a young man who I will call Ronnie. Ronnie was a young adult member of a church I served a long time ago, and Ronnie has Down's syndrome. Ronnie was a good-hearted, enthusiastic young man. Shortly after my arrival, I moved into a house just down the road from him. One day I saw Ronnie and I said "Hello Neighbor." Ronnie was delighted. I don't think he ever called me Pastor Charlie again. Any time we saw each other he said "Hello Neighbor." And if anyone was nearby, he would enthusiastically tell them "He's my neighbor."

Ronnie had a strong faith and he was in worship regularly. He would sing with gusto. Sometimes he was a little off key (says the pastor who usually sings off key...) but Ronnie loved to sing with enthusiasm. He was loud! Visitors would sometimes turn their heads, while the rest of us just smiled.

Ronnie was one of three or four young adults with Down's Syndrome who were part of a Sunday School class at that church. Every week, a few of them would gather with faithful teachers, to learn Bible stories and share fellowship and pray together.

Having a few adults dedicated as teachers for a class of only 2 or 3 or 4 people didn't make sense in a church where it was sometimes hard to find teachers. But it was that church's effort to be inclusive, to welcome people who sometimes were forgotten or ignored or not included in church life.

The church wasn't perfect—no church is. But I applaud them for that long-term commitment to inclusion, to trying to make all people feel welcome, as part of the church's commitment to following Jesus.

Following Jesus is not easy. Jesus turned things upside down.

- Jesus' mother Mary sang about how he would bring the powerful down and fill the hungry with good things

- Jesus began his ministry proclaiming good news for the poor and recovery of sight for the blind
- Jesus regularly welcomed the forgotten and ignored people: tax collectors, foreigners, sick people, poor people, women....

His words and deeds tore down the walls of the day. Jesus brought a message of inclusion. But the first followers of Jesus and the early church took a while to get this message; that everyone is a beloved child of God.

Peter was also a rule follower, a letter of the law kind of guy. And according to “the book,” if you were Jewish, you were “unclean.” So he thought “those people” should be excluded.

But in Acts 10, we see how God flips Peter’s understanding upside down, telling him about God’s inclusive love. Peter realizes this and then makes the claim that God shows no partiality.

This realization helps bring about the Jerusalem council (in Acts 15) which opened up the church more broadly.

Sadly, over 2000 years of the church, we keep finding ways to circle the wagons to exclude “those people.”

- For hundreds of years, too many white Christians thought they were doing God’s will by denying citizenship and humanity to Blacks and Native Americans.
- For hundreds of years, too many male Christians thought they were doing God’s will by keeping women quiet and subservient in church and in society.
- For hundreds of years, too many Bible reading Christians thought they were doing God’s will when they took a few verses very literally and excluded and dehumanized lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

It takes time for us to learn about God’s welcome for all people, that God shows no partiality.

And we're still learning.

In our day and age, we're learning about transgender and non-binary people. And I'll be the first to admit that I'm learning too.

I'm glad to be part of the Presbyterian Church USA, and together we are striving to include everyone, to make God's love more real.

In our church's "A Brief Statement of Faith" we affirm:

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

I've always appreciated the line about hearing voices of peoples long-silenced. This seems like the sort of thing that Jesus did.

Throughout the Bible, if we choose to see it, there is a message of inclusion and welcome.

- One of the best loved verses begins: "For God so loved the world..." (John 3.16) It's not "For God so loved the Christians, or the white-male landowners, or the Presbyterians. For God so loved the world. Everyone.
- The apostle Paul wrote: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3.28) Because of God's love, our walls should come down.
- And in the final book of the Bible, we read about God's love for all people: "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,

robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” (Revelation 7:9-10)

And of course, the core teaching of Jesus is about love. Love your neighbor. Love one another. Love your enemies. God shows no partiality.

Jesus calls us to love one another, to love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies. That means people of different backgrounds and nationalities. People of different religious and political beliefs.

In our world today, we aren’t very good at loving or taking the message of “no partiality” to heart. We are deeply divided and distrustful. Sadly, things have not gotten better during the Covid era.

Journalist and author Fareed Zakaria wrote *Ten Lessons for a Post Pandemic World*, with chapters that highlight some of our challenges: inefficient government, devaluing of experts, the growing problem of inequality, the increasing tension between the US and China, and more. The book is a sober but ultimately hopeful look at where we are right now, and he ends with words of encouragement, challenging us to work together for the common good, in essence to include one another in making the world a better place.

He concludes with a call to cooperate:

“If people cooperate, they will achieve better outcomes and more durable solutions than they could acting alone. If nations can avoid war, their people will lead longer, richer, and more secure lives. If they become intertwined economically, everyone ends up better off.... It is not a flight of fancy to believe that cooperation can change the world. It is common sense.” (p. 233)

The good news of Easter is resurrection and new life. God forgives sin, God loves the world, God shows no partiality.

So that means each and every one of us is a beloved child of God. God loves each of us, even with our sin, even with the dumb things that we

say and do. God's love is persistent and God's love is big and shows no partiality.

And that means, if we claim to be God's people, to be Christians, to believe in resurrection, then we need to do the best we can at loving one another and showing no partiality.

This is a message we've heard before, and we need to keep hearing it. Reading the Bible in different translations helps me to keep hearing God's call.

I have read and heard Acts 10.34 dozens of times, from the New Revised Standard Version, and I know it well:

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

So I was glad to read a different translation over the past few weeks, from the Common English Bible:

"I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another."

May we all keep learning about God's inclusive love and living that love. Amen.