

Sermon Text for June 9, 2019

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 55:1-5, Acts 10:34-47
“Why can’t we all get along?”

I posted on Facebook a picture of our new view from our new deck at our new house. I got a lot of responses for someone like me. Because I’ve lived in other countries I love the reaction that some people have had: some Italian friends asked me if I was on vacation. It was hard for them to imagine that people actually lived in places where their back yards are farms. Having lived in a number of different countries it is always a pure joy discovering different perspectives on life events or routine things for us or for them that is quite different between us. Both of our Scriptures today speak of nations colliding, in a good way, as they gather to worship the living God, the God who made us from the same clay and breathed life into us.

Often we understand our Christian faith in terms of our national identity. Sometimes it is hard to understand when we meet Koreans that there are more Korean Presbyterians than there are US Presbyterians. In the PC(USA) we have just over 1 million members. In South Korea there are 10 million Presbyterians. When we think of the continent of Africa it is hard for us living here to think that there are countries, like Ghana, that have a whole large swath of Christians who love and serve God in equal measure, and even a bit more enthusiasm than we do. Ghana is 1 tenth the size of the US and yet the Presbyterian church is about the same size as ours here in the US.

These basic facts are stated to move us away from a nationalistic focused Christianity, to a recognition that the faith that we have has been passed down to us from the Middle East, through Europe, to now the US. Today, for us, it is exciting to think of all different people celebrating the basic beliefs of our Christian faith. But it wasn’t always a celebration, and quite honestly today, not every Christian is excited to hear that there are foreigners who worship the same God that we do. For Peter, it took a lot to break him out of his old understanding that God had limited his saving power to only a certain type of people. Last week he was coaxed and cajoled by God to open his eyes.

This week, today, he has an ah ha moment and realizes that God not only wants us to all get along, but he wants us all to worship him.

So what does that have to do with Pentecost? Watch for the presence of the Holy Spirit in this passage, for it is the Spirit of God which brings us together and keeps us together.

READ

We've set the stage already for this showdown between Peter and Cornelius. Peter's first words that we read today after this very eventful experience: pigs in a blanket, having to walk into a gentile's house, having the gentile fall at your feet and worship you, read the story, a lot has happened to get us here to this point today. All the while Peter is very skeptical that he should be there at all, much less that this person is going to be able to benefit at all from his preaching about Jesus Christ.

But his first words today are: You know, I just realized, standing here with you, that God shows no partiality. I didn't know what that meant before today. God doesn't pick and choose, so why was I trying to pick and choose based upon what people looked like, or based upon the fact that you are in my nation's eyes, dirty.

To God, Peter realizes, there is something that really doesn't matter to God. There is something that makes no difference to God whatsoever. It is something that he doesn't care about. Race, culture, nationality, ethnicity. This story once and for all smashes the excuses for prejudice that allows us to build walls to keep people out of church. The distinction that we use to divide and separate people within other nations and our own nation are a matter of utter indifference to God.

God does not care what color you are or what language you speak or what country you hail from. I think it must horrify the Lord that his divine and inspired creativity which made human beings with different skin colors and body sizes and nose shapes and eye shapes. This creativity that caused him to rub his hands together with glee and say: "Oh my, no that's very good." I think it horrifies him that those wonderful, creative variations have become an excuse for people of evil or ignorant purpose to divide or exclude from the Body of Christ.

Peter was one of those trying to divide until God came and gave him a vision, which three times he would not accept. Only today, in these verses do we find that he

gets it: I truly understand, it took a while, I fought it, but I get it...finally. God shows no partiality. This isn't the only place where we see this approach by God. It has been there all along. We are going to play Bible drill now for a few moments to find these places in Scripture that show us this important teaching for today: Isaiah 55:5 – all the nations shall come and worship. I Samuel 16:7 – one of my favorite memory verses, People judge on the outside but God judges the heart. Romans 2:11 – again the words that we heard earlier today but by Paul, God shows no partiality.

The kicker is found in James 2:9 – where it states very clearly that we are not even allowed to have a partial view, it states very clearly that if we do, we sin. God creates differences, we create partiality. God created us from the very same mud and dirt, we created prejudices and favoritism.

For Peter, that was all he knew, he had to rewrite his own history, what he had learned growing up, what he had been taught in school and from his friends, that Gentiles were dogs and were dirty. In fact, in vs. 44 you see his entourage, his friends who are totally amazed because these people were receiving God's precious gift the Holy Spirit. In these verses Peter's shocking discovery was that God loved the Roman Gentile dogs as much as he loved his chosen Jewish children.

But if God is indifferent to race, in vs. 35 we see very clearly that he is not indifferent to religion. That is the other clear teaching of this story. God doesn't care about the color or culture of who believes, but He does care what you believe.

Look at Cornelius. He was a sincere devout man. Vs. 2 and 22 of this chapter repeat over and over again that he was a man of God. If he was so devout and sincere then why did God have to shake Peter out of his cultural prejudices to walk inside a Gentile home and share the Gospel? Because until Cornelius and all those in that room had received the message of Jesus they had not yet received the fullness of God's truth. Until they had received the message of Jesus, they could not receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit as we see in vs. 44.

Our culture doesn't make this necessary distinction. Our culture decries racism and division within our human family. In this, our culture is right. In this, our culture agrees with God. But, our culture also decries the exclusive claims of Christianity. Our culture says that it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe something. As

long as you are sincere, as long as you are kind and gentle and good to other human beings. As long as you are true to yourself and to God...as you know that God. In this culture, our culture could not be more wrong.

Cornelius was sincere, he was kind and good, he was true to God and to himself. But he was wrong. Until Peter brought to him the Good News of Jesus. We can find truth and grace and forgiveness only in Jesus Christ. Not all religions are the same, they don't all lead to one God, because only through Jesus Christ can we arrive at God. You know, it matters what we believe is true, it matters to God, it should matter to us too.

We are living in a time when like Peter we are seeing history and the church change before our eyes. This church has been in this community for over 187 years which in and of itself is quite a monumental task. We celebrate our history and what continues to keep us together is that what matters to God has always mattered to us. This exclusive claim that we hold in the name of Jesus Christ keeps us together, as it ought to. But look around you, our church is changing. Peter had a hard time breaking his old habits. We can approach our changes as Peter did hang onto our church and protect it and defend it at all costs from those people that God has put in our midst to worship at the feet of Jesus that may be different from us.

Or we can do what finally, finally, Peter did as he eventually relented, let the Holy Spirit move and reclaim this church, this body as God's church. This is not Peter's church, this is not any of the pastor's church, this is not even your church. This is God's church and he wants to see the next 200 years as years where Jesus Christ continues to be preached to all nations.

If you think about it over the past 187 years this church has walked in times of unity and in times of factions. People have left, come back, left again. People have come aboard and for generations have worshipped here. But God has blessed this church today with peace and unity. I believe that is because those things that God has considered important, we have maintained as being crucial to our identity. As a result we ought to be able to in our legacy be able to receive all of God's children with love and direction.

Amen.