
Open to all?
Martin Grove United Church
April 24, 2016
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 10:1-11:18

Is anyone else a bit confused by today's reading from Acts? We have people traveling around. We have dreams. We have strangers and strange people doing strange things? We have confusion between the idea of baptism with water and baptism by the spirit. What is going on? Well, in fact, this piece of the story is the simple part.

In 3 weeks, we will celebrate pentecost - traditionally taken to be the birth of the Christian church. And today's - very long - reading outlines an important part of that story. It is hard to pin down the exact beginnings of Christianity. We could start with Jesus as a disciple of John the baptizer. Or we could start with Jesus's public ministry and his disciples. But no matter where we imagine the movement started, "The Jesus Movement", sometimes referred to as "The Way", started as a sect within Judaism. Their leader - Jesus - was Jewish of course, and would never have heard the word "Christian" during his lifetime. The earliest disciples were all Jewish too. They also would never have heard the word "Christian".

So how did a Jewish sect become a non-Jewish religion? Well, that's a long story, but one of the early steps in that story was the acceptance of non-Jewish people as followers of Jesus. And most of the book of Acts is about the interplay between Jewish followers of Jesus and non-Jewish followers of Jesus which happened as the Jesus movement expanded geographically. Our story today is entirely about that one step in the journey - one transition in the way the Jesus movement understood itself.

And it's safe to say that the transition was not a simple, straight-forward one. Because the transition had to do with acceptance of others. The transition had to do with deciding who was an insider and who was an outsider. The transition therefore effected identity. And changes to identity are always struggles. In a few weeks we will see that there were many other cultural inputs that went into making up the Christian religion, including Roman, Greek, and Egyptian influences. Including pagan groups and sun

worshippers. Including lots of exotic groups.

Today's story is simple by comparison. In this story, the only real issue is whether or not non-Jewish people could be accepted as followers of Jesus. Peter, one of the leaders at the time, clearly felt that only Jewish people could be part of the Jesus movement. At least until Peter had his dream and met Cornelius. To the early Jesus movement, Cornelius was a problem. Cornelius was a devout person who prayed to God, and who helped people in need. He wanted to follow Jesus. But - he was not Jewish.

The Jesus movement had to make an important decision. Did they want to maintain their cultural integrity and purity? Or did they want to maintain their commitment to the principles that Jesus lived out and taught? Did the group want to maintain their cultural interests and biases, or did they want to live a more inclusive life. In short, the early Jesus movement had to choose between giving up on Cornelius, or giving up on Jesus.

Much of the book of Acts in fact is about the struggle in the early church to know who was a follower of Jesus - who was a member of the movement called "The Way". Since the earliest followers of Jesus were Jewish - as was Jesus - and since the earliest followers saw Jesus as the Jewish messiah, there were many who felt that Jesus' message was only for Jewish people. We have to remember that 2000 years ago, most societal groups saw themselves as very distinct, and they were often unwilling to mix socially. Jewish people were no exception to that. So the idea of a Jewish messiah whose mission went beyond the bounds of his cultural heritage was - to say the least - a radical idea. And like most radical ideas, it was not accepted right away by all people, not even by all supporters.

One person that needed time in order to accept this radical idea was Peter. He needed not only time, but a dream from God. In the dream, God offers different foods for Peter to eat. But Peter refuses, making reference to ideas in the Jewish Bible that some foods were unclean, and not fit to be eaten - by God's own command. In the dream, Peter actually tries to correct God using the Bible. But God said that the food was clean, simply because God had called it clean.

The reference to food in the dream is an analogy of course, an analogy to people

who were considered unclean. And God in Peter's dream is saying that all the peoples of the world are people of God. That we are all insiders. That there is no difference between insiders and outsiders. Or - more to the point for Peter - that there is no longer any distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish people as far as being followers of Jesus was concerned.

This was an important point for the Christian community at the time, because the number of non-Jewish followers of Jesus grew rapidly to become significantly larger than the number of Jewish followers of Jesus. It was a very important point for the early church that was expanding rapidly and including people of increasingly different backgrounds. St. Paul put it clearly in Galatians with his famous line, "now there is no longer Jew or non-Jew, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Let me tell you a story. I have a small sailboat. When I say small, I mean that I pull it with my Toyota Carolla. When I bought the boat, I had no idea how to sail, but through a combination of books, the Internet, and trial and error, I learned to sail adequately. And as I started to get out on the water more, I met other boaters. And I discovered that there are 2 types of boaters. Some boaters love spending time boating. They will find endless creative excuses to skip work to be on the water. For them, being on the water is the whole point of boating. Other boaters love spending time improving their boats. They spend time researching options, installing new equipment, or upgrading to a larger model from time to time. Some boaters even contract a disease called "2 foot-itis" which is a condition where you imagine that if you bought a boat just 2 feet longer than your current boat, you'd have lots of space onboard and be happy forever. Some boaters are struck with 2 foot-itis every couple of years.

It's an odd thing. On the one hand, if you don't have a boat, you can't get on the water at all. But once you have a boat, for many people, the allure of the water fades into the background and their interest in the boat itself becomes the driving force. Is the point of having a boat to get onto the water, or is the point of a boat to just make you want an even better boat? Is the act of boating more - or less - important than having a boat?

Some boaters end up worshipping their boats. Other boaters just see their boat as a tool to get them onto the water.

I think the same process happens in religious circles too. Some religious people get hung up on the trappings of their religion, on ritualistic rules - like Peter imagining that non-Jewish people could not *possibly* be baptized. But other religious people are less concerned with the rules, and are more interested in opening their hearts to whatever direction the spirit leads them - like Cornelius. How are we to understand that? Was Peter more “religious” while Cornelius was more “faithful”? Even today, there is a lot of confusion as to what it means to be a faithful member of a religious community. And I think that happens because God is always larger than what we imagine.

To quote from my Interpreter’s Bible of 1954, “The modern distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ is largely false. The activity carried on in a church is no more sacred than that carried on in a laboratory. One can be profane in either place to the extent to which one directs one’s energies to the business of exploiting what is found, rather than exclaiming at the wonder of it. Hence the true division is between the sacred and the profane - that which is centered upon God and that which is not; and the introspective, self-centred worship found in a church may be as profane in this sense as the materialistic research found in a laboratory. On the other hand the selfless, unflagging persistence of a scientist who has dedicated his life to the fuller understanding of the physical universe may be as sacred a thing as the humble prayer of a saint who finds the fulfilment of life in the adoration of God.”¹

Each of us is called to be faithful in our own way. In the laboratory, in hospital, in accounting, in marketing, in transportation, and yes, in this church too. We are called to go beyond what we know. We are called to go beyond what we think. We are called to go beyond what we feel. We are called to be open to all people. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ *The Interpreter’s Bible*, volume 9, pg 137, 1954.