
We are all connected
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 10:1 - 11:18

We hear a lot these days about how we should tolerate people who are different from us. Well, just for the record, I strongly disagree with that sentiment. I will tell you boldly and without qualifiers that we should stop tolerating people who are different. If that surprises you, please give me a moment to let me unpack that statement, because what I mean is not what Donald Trump and his buddies mean when they doesn't tolerate something - not at all.

But before we get there, last week, I promised to "prove" to you that we are all related to each other. And I'm prepared to do just that. That's the good news. The bad news is we need to use both math and physics to do it. If you feel the need to leave right now, the door is conveniently located at the back of the sanctuary.

Let me ask - how many generations back do you know all your ancestors by name? Apparently, most people cannot even get to 3 generations. Because [slide 10 gens]

to go 3 generations back requires the names of 8 ancestors, and many people don't know all 8. How many people know all 16 names to go back 4 generations, or the 1024 names it takes to get to 10 generations?

[slide 20 gens]

If you go back 20 generations, you have over 1 million ancestors, and by 29 generations, you have over 500 million ancestors. This might seem strange, or perhaps irrelevant, however

[slide: global population]

if we consider the population of our planet, and how it has changed over time, you can see that in the year 1500, the global population was 461 million people. And if we go back to the year 1500, you have 460 million ancestors. Which means that your ancestors in the year 1500 made up the entire global population. But so did my ancestors. So we

have the same ancestors. We are all related. I won't attempt to name the relationships between each of us, because that would be very convoluted, but we are related. And if we could figure out our exact relationships, the greeting card industry would just be delighted.

That's enough math. How about some physics now.

[slide : prism]

We all know what this is, right? It's a prism. And what does a prism do? A prism breaks down white light into its component colours. Do you know what else a prism does? Yes, it can be used as a paperweight. But what else does it do? It also takes coloured lights - at the appropriate angles - and combines them into white light. Magic, right? But I have to tell you a secret. There is no such thing as white light - except in your mind, or perhaps I should say in your retina. Remember that light is a wave of photons, and different wavelengths of light give us different colours.

[slide: EM spectrum]

The colours each have a corresponding wavelength, as you see. But where is the white? There is no white in the visible spectrum because there is no wavelength that corresponds to white light.

[slide: prism]

We see what we call white light when the different colours come together, and our brain/retina interprets that as white. But there is no light that is actually white.

And that's just like a healthy community. Different people with different backgrounds come together, retain their individuality, and yet also create something new - community. In an inclusive community, individuals are celebrated for who they are, not just their ability to "fit in". Differences are not tolerated, they are sought out and celebrated!

That's why I said earlier - we should stop tolerating people. Because tolerating people is actually not very positive. You can easily tolerate a person by just ignoring them, but then you miss out on the gift of the other person. Differences should be embraced, lifted up, incorporated, celebrated. Not just tolerated. If the best you can do with another person is tolerate them - go back and try a bit harder!

This “proof” using light does not prove that we are related. It proves something even more important. It proves that we need each other. All of us. If any one colour is missing from the spectrum, we do not get white light. We need everybody right here to make this community what it needs to be.

Which brings us - finally - to our reading from Acts today. In 2 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 issue.

And we need to imagine that that transition was not a simple, straight-forward one. Because the transition had to do with acceptance of others. The transition had to do with 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 are many other cultural inputs that went into making up the original Christian religion, including Roman, Greek, and Egyptian influences. Including pagan groups and sun worshippers. Including lots of exotic groups. As the followers of Jesus expanded geographically, they also expanded culturally, philosophically, ritually, and theologically. To imagine that Christianity simply grew out of Judaism is so simplistic that it borders on delusional. But we will get to that in later weeks.

Today’s story is simple by comparison. In this story, the only real issue being

dealt with 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. But all that changed when 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. How was that going to work?

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 principle of inclusivity that Jesus lived for and taught? Did the group want to maintain their cultural biases, or did they want to live a more inclusive life. In short, the early Jesus movement had to choose between accepting Cornelius, or giving up on Jesus.

So who might we identify with in this story? Perhaps, we would identify with Peter. Perhaps we would be part of the established group - the status quo - the people who have been around for awhile. And we see that things are changing. We see that we no longer define the cultural norms in our own society. Perhaps we really sympathize with Peter. We want things to stay as they are. we want things to stay comfortable for us. Well that's great - but as you may have noticed, we are all surrounded by people who are different from us. We need to do something with them. And I'm sure that we - open-minded people that we are - think we are pretty good at tolerating other people. We are all inclusive people, right?

Perhaps. But there are 2 types of inclusive behaviour. What type are you? I suppose it depends on the options, but we regularly see both passive and active inclusion played out in our society, and even in this church. For bonus points, listen carefully to our Ontario political candidates and see what sort of inclusion they preach. It just might help you make your decision on election day.

Passive inclusion is where we say that we accept everyone, but we do it by the simple expedient of not really paying much attention to "the other" anyway. We put up with people who are different, and we don't attack them, which is good. But at the same time, we don't really engage with them at all. That's passive inclusion, which is not

particularly healthy.

So what does active inclusion look like? Active inclusion is the reality where we do not tolerate people, rather, we engage with them, interact with them, and fully expect to learn from them as they - perhaps - learn from us too. There is no need to tolerate a person that you feel you are on an equal footing with - there is only the desire to learn from the other person with the hope of growing yourself. Active inclusion is a state where we can accept other people for who they are, without feeling the compulsion to either imitate them or correct them. Other people get to be themselves. And we get to be ourselves too. Active inclusion is healthy! Active inclusion is realizing that we are incomplete without the other, and that the other person actually might hold 1 piece of the puzzle of life for us. Active inclusion is realizing that all colours are required in order to make white light. Active inclusion is realizing that we are all related, whether you agree with the math or not!

I would like to close with this prayer which says a lot about church community.

Stewardship Prayer (Archdiocese of Rochester)

My church is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is. It will be friendly, if I am. Its pews will be filled, if I help fill them. It will do great work, if I work. It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver. It will bring other people into its worship and fellowship, if I invite and bring them. It will be a church of loyalty and love, or fearlessness and faith, and a church with a noble spirit, if I, who make it what it is, am filled with these same things. Therefore, with the help of God, I shall dedicate myself to the task of being all the things that I want my church to be.

Amen.