
Who is your neighbour?
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 10

I suppose I should start by apologizing. To those of you who read the “teaser” for this service in our weekly email, “Happenings”, I had offered to present my take on, “What is the most important chapter in the Bible?” Well, excuse me for trying to get you to think before the service. But in fairness, when I came to write this reflection, I realized I had to lower my expectations just a little bit. Because the question I should have asked was this: “What’s the most important chapter in the Bible for the church?” Well, by now it must be obvious to you what my answer is. It must be Acts 10, since we just read the entire chapter together. That much is obvious. What may be less obvious is why I think it’s important. And moreover, how does this tie in at all with the title, “Who is your neighbour?”

Acts 10 is perhaps an odd chapter for anyone to imagine being important, let alone the most important chapter in the Bible. Some person - Peter - who we don’t know much about has a dream about a bedsheet full of animals descending from the heavens and he has to decide whether or not to eat the animals. Really? On the surface the story sounds not only uninteresting, but the story doesn’t even sound very sensible. Which is the point actually. But I’m getting ahead of myself. And - as often happens around here - we need just a little bit of history.

The early Jesus movement was entirely Jewish. Jesus and his friends were Jewish. The first people who joined the Jesus club - a club often simply called “The Way” were all Jewish. And that club evolved over time into what we now call the Christian Church. It takes very little imagination to realize that there were a number of steps in-between, in order to transition from a small sect within Judaism to the largest religion on the planet. Some of those steps involved geographic expansion. Some of those steps involved theological expansion. But one critical step - depicted in Acts 10 - is the decision to allow the Jesus movement to move beyond the bounds of Judaism.

I think it's honestly very hard to relate to that today. Sure, we do still have overt racism and sexism in Canada, but I believe that - on balance - we are becoming more open-minded and tolerant of others. To make sense of today's story we have to imagine a world where Jewish people felt that they were God's chosen people and that non-Jewish people were therefore less valuable in the sight of God. They were seen as inferior. They were "goyim", and that was not a compliment. In that context, it was only natural that members of a Jewish sect were not automatically keen to embrace outsiders, and indeed their traditions required them to have minimal contact with others. The restriction only existed through the Jewish lens. The romans would talk with anyone. But 2000 years ago, Jewish people wanted to remain separate and aloof.

And so we have Cornelius, a non-Jewish person who experienced the presence of God in his midst. Cornelius was driven to want an audience with Peter. In normal day-to-day life, Peter would not speak with Cornelius because of the Jewish idea of not speaking to non-Jewish people. But then Peter has his dream, and the dream includes a bedsheet full of animals that Jewish tradition declared unclean (and therefore not fit to be eaten). God tells Peter to eat. And Peter decides to remind God of what is in the Bible and points out to God that the animals are all unclean. And God simply declares that they are clean. And furthermore, that if God declares them clean, they are clean. God puts religious tradition where it belongs, which is behind God.

The dream tells Peter that all animals are clean. Reality tells Peter that all people are clean. That there are no "special people". That there is no chosen race. That since God made all people, that we are all children of God and that we should all relate to each other. Peter - to his credit - gets the message and goes to find Cornelius. And I do give Peter credit for this. I think I myself could easily have missed the intended point of that strange dream.

And that's why I argue this is the most important chapter in the Bible for the Christian Church. Because if Peter had failed to get the point of the dream, the Jesus club would have remained a sect within Judaism, and a very small one at that. It would never have embraced all people as potential members of the Jesus club. The Christian Church would never had gotten started. And it's not just that the Church would not have started.

It's that the church could not have started. Because Christian principles are fundamentally non-racist. Now before you correct me, yes I am aware that we have not always lived out that vision fully. The Christian Church has made many trips into racist behaviour, including the Crusades against Muslims, centuries of support for slavery, and the conquest of North America at the expense of indigenous people. Those were mistakes - deviations from Christian aspirations - not the way the Church should have acted. The fundamental basis of Christianity is acceptance that all people are children of God. Period. What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Someone asked me recently if I thought there was anything truly unique to Christianity - compared to other religions - in how we are told to treat each other. Is the Christian "moral code" the same as the moral codes from other religions? And if it is different, is it better or worse?

Some people argue that all religions are the same. In my experience, the people who say that know very little about other religions, or usually don't know too much about their own religion either. There are fundamental differences between how different religions express their own narrative within the bounds of the human condition. Or perhaps I should say there are differences in how the human condition is expressed without the bounds of the narrative. But that's a bit high-level and esoteric. When it comes to how religious people are instructed to act, the teachings are similar. All religions say that we should love each other. But depending on the narrative, the definition of "we" isn't always the same. Sometimes "we" means everybody we might meet. Sometimes "we" means people who look and act like we do. Sometimes "we" excludes people we don't like. The command that we should love each other is very different if "we" is understood to mean only people that I like.

Jesus was not the first or the last, but he - and therefore Christianity - gets credit for understanding that "we" means everybody. A Jewish scholar asked Jesus what the most important commandment was. And Jesus responded "Love God, love your neighbour, and love yourself." The scholar - looking for a loophole - then asked Jesus, "but who is my neighbour?". And in response, Jesus shared the story of the good samaritan. And the point of that story is that anyone who needs you is your neighbour.

It's a very clear picture of inclusion - just like on our bulletin cover, that shows neighbours helping out with the recent floods in Muskoka.

And that was confirmed in Acts 10 too, when Peter had to choose who was eligible for the Jesus club. Was it going to be just Jewish people, or was it going to be anybody who wanted to join. And Peter in the end said, "everybody". So the correct answer to the question, "Who is 'we'?" is "Who isn't?" That's not unique to Christianity, but 2000 years ago it was an upgrade from the cultural norm of Jewish exclusivism.

And today - if we ourselves want to be open to people to join in our Jesus club here in Rexdale - who should we be looking for? Obviously, anyone that God sends through our front door. But who else? I have heard many of you explain to me that most of the people moving into this neighbourhood are either not religious, or belong to religions other than Christianity. Certainly, statistically non-religious people are becoming a larger group. Across North America survey after survey shows a rapid rise in the religious group called "nones". This group is made up of people who, when doing a survey and presented with a list of religious groups to claim as their own select the label "none". There are so many of them now that we actually call them, "nones". How can we connect with that group? It's not that they do not want to join Christianity, they don't want to join any religious group, and in fact are reluctant to join groups of any sort. Their sense of identity simply does not come from group affiliation, something that many of us grew up thinking was completely normal.

What should we do if we decide that new residents to the neighbourhood around here are mainly "nones" or non-Christian? What should our response be? From Acts 10 again, "That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 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." The work of Jesus was "doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil". I know quite a lot of "nones" myself that are actually pretty good at doing that themselves. Perhaps they don't use the same words that we would use to describe their actions, but many "nones" and non-Christians are very good at "doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil." Perhaps, we can start there.

Besides, the point of all the Jesus stories about neighbours boils down to recognizing our neighbour in others even though they don't fit our own demographic. Why would we expect them to be like us? Are you confused yet? Is Rev. Paul really saying that we should open our doors to non-Christians. This is a church after all. What is he talking about now. 2000 years ago Peter had a vision to move beyond Jewish exclusivism. Today, in that same spirit, we are called to move beyond Christian exclusivism.

What God has made clean, you must not call profane. Now - go and meet your neighbours.

Amen.