

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But I replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” But a second time the voice answered from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.” And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there, but Cornelius was not. That seems like a random statement to make. Of course Cornelius wasn't there! He wasn't part of Jesus' inner circle. Not one of the 12 disciples. He didn't even live in the area. He was stationed 70+ miles away in Caesarea. He was part of the Roman occupation force, Italian division. And he was a Gentile. Oh - Hmm. Maybe we should have started with that. Cornelius was a Gentile and was considered unclean by those first chosen by God. There's no way he would have been at the table that night.

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there, but Judas was not. And you may not have caught that. The first line of our gospel lesson said, "When HE had gone out." That's Judas leaving the room. Out into the night to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities. While he was still there, at the table, Judas is given the same label as Cornelius, by Jesus no less. He is called unclean.

And yet he was there – and he had been there, for three years now. There for the teachings. There for the signs and the healings. There at the table for this final meal. And so I wonder, and have often wondered, why the disciples, any of the disciples, don't look for Judas, or even ask about him, after he departs? After all, in this gospel at least, they don't seem to understand the exchange that happens between Jesus and Judas. And it's a pretty straightforward exchange. Jesus says one of you will betray me. The disciples

want to know who. Jesus says the one I hand this piece of bread to – and hands a piece of bread to Judas.

But they don't get it. And yet no one asks. And no one searches. As the rest of them make their way out into the night, and hear yet more lessons from their teacher. Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there, and Judas was too. At least for a while.

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there, and again, Cornelius was not. At least not that night. But after some convincing, Peter brings him in and offers him a seat. And I think the fact that Judas was at that table on that “last” night with Jesus is at least part of the reason why Peter goes to Caesarea in the first place – though a vision and a voice seem like pretty compelling reasons as well.

But I think Peter's been reflecting on that night and on what happened with Judas. And I think, when this happens, when this vision comes, he remembers what Jesus said about them not all being clean – and maybe he remembers what he did that night as well, before the cock crowed. Thinking about that word unclean – and hearing God's voice telling him not to make distinctions.

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there – but others were not.

Several weeks ago, a group of 8 teenagers stood before their congregation in Omaha. They had been through a year-long confirmation class and were there to be recognized as the newest members of First United Methodist Church. Instead, the teens read a letter to the congregation. They talked about how welcome they had always felt

there and reflected on good memories they had shared as a small group and as part of the larger group. They said, “We have always known that gay families are just like other families, we are surrounded by peers of all gender identities...and we have never thought anything was strange about women pastors.”¹ Despite all of the warmth they felt for that particular congregation, they were dismayed by the recent actions of the Methodist Church as a whole and were declining to join First United until that congregation decided what they were doing about their membership in the denomination.

I have mixed feelings about this. I applaud these young people for their dedication to others not yet included, but the best way to create space for others is not always to leave the table yourself.

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there. And now, after his meeting with Peter, Cornelius is as well. Sort of.

Probably two decades ago now, the churches in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, where I’m originally from, began an area-wide ministry to provide a hot meal and nightly shelter for those who needed it during the winter months. Sort of like what you all take part in at First Baptist, except that this was a movable shelter throughout the season. An individual congregation in Hampton or Newport News would sign up for a particular week and the shelter space would move from one congregation to the next. The parent organization, named H.E.L.P., would bring mats and blankets for the guests to use at each location.

My home church in Hampton was a part of this and so I was involved as a volunteer for a while. And it was a great ministry that helped out a lot of folks. But I noticed that, with several churches, there was a tendency to relegate the individuals that came through the doors to specific areas of the church building.

I understood some of the need for this, in many ways, but it struck me that often the parts of the church that were denied to those coming in for food, shelter and assistance, were the sanctuary and/or chapel spaces. Places where we often think we need to be, or places we want to be, for prayer and the presence of God. The guests were often invited by some of the churches' members to return on Sunday morning for church service. But, if you aren't welcome in the sanctuary on a Tuesday evening, or at 3am on a Thursday when you want some alone time to pray, would you want to come back on Sunday morning?

Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago speaks to the fact that we really don't know how to interact with those who are somehow different from us – in the church or in the world. He says “ ‘we [will] accept diversity as long as we can still be kind of mono-cultural at the same time’ – in other words, we expect those of different races or ethnicities to look like us and act like us.”² They can come in as long as they don't ask us to change. Rah believes we are called instead, all of us, to see the larger narrative; to look for those places of connection where God might be at work in this changing landscape.

When Peter first arrived in Caesarea, Cornelius dropped at his feet, as if he were worthy of worship – and Peter lifted him up and said, “I am only a mortal.” In other words, I’m just like you. And after they were baptized, the whole of the household, they sat with Peter for a meal at the family table, an expression of kinship that went far beyond just being part of the same church.

This is the behavior that got Peter in trouble with his fellow believers in Jerusalem, this breaking of bread with unclean Gentiles – not bringing them into the church. The Jerusalem leaders were remembering, with good reason, the Maccabean revolt and the Roman occupation of their community that sprang from it. They were worried about their identity, their Jewish identity, being lost or getting watered down. Bringing outsiders in could very well have turned their reality inside out. But Peter, hearing and listening to God’s voice and following God’s lead, chose to look for those connections and for what God was doing next.

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there. And Cornelius was too.

Martin Buber writes, “This is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of danger and of risk, of eternal beginning and eternal becoming, of opened spirit and of deep realization, the kingdom of holy insecurity.”³

Poet Neil Geiman, in *After Silence*, pens this:

“Nothing is ever over

life breathes life in its turn

Sometimes the people listen

Sometimes the people learn”⁴

Love one another, Jesus said.

You all here at Montreat Presbyterian are in a pretty unique situation. You get a lot of visitors. Those who come for church retreats and stay for the weekend. Family and friends and long-time supporters of the conference center who come to enjoy some downtime. People like Robin and me who come to the area for a time of renewal, not knowing how long it will last, but grateful for the opportunity and glad to become part of you. But there aren't many real outsiders who find their way here – not a ton of people who don't know about church and how we worship as Presbyterians or what we believe about God, Jesus and the Bible. And your location inside a somewhat isolated community and the presence of a “gate” at the front make getting outsiders here a lot less likely.

So perhaps the story of Peter and Cornelius and the reaction of the church brothers to that sharing of a family meal becomes a little more important for us as we leave here today - and especially as we leave this space for a season. Because what we say and do, the things that we profess and affirm here, matter deeply. But if they don't translate into what we say and do out there than they don't matter much. This isn't Vegas.

Love one another, Jesus said. And Peter was there. But others were missing. And others are still missing – from this table – and from all tables. Millions who are waiting for a seat. Who long to be fed. Who long to be safe. Who long to be heard. Who long to

be understood. Who long to be valued. Who long to be welcomed. Fully welcomed. As we first were, when Peter sat at table with Cornelius and his household.

Love one another, Jesus said. Until there isn't an empty seat at any table. Inside, or out.

¹ Yonat Shimron, "Protesting Methodist LGBTQ policy, confirmation class takes a pass." Religious News Service (<https://religionnews.com/2019/04/29/protesting-methodist-lgbtq-policy-confirmation-class-takes-a-pass/>, May 15, 2019)

² Leslie Scanlon, "Look for God in places of change, Rah tells NEXT Church," (<https://pres-outlook.org/2017/03/look-god-places-change-rah-tells-next-church/>, May 18, 2019)

³ Buber, as cited in Taylor, Barbara B. Holy Envy, page 81

⁴ Maria Popova, "After Silence: Amanda Palmer Reads Neil Gaiman's Stunning Poem Celebrating Rachel Carson's Legacy of Culture-Shifting Courage," (https://www.brainpickings.org/2019/02/07/after-silence-neil-gaiman-rachel-carson/?mc_cid=875ee709d3&mc_eid=e76cc1c22d, May 12, 2019)