

I John 4: 17-21

¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

ACTS 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If 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?" ¹⁸When 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."

God Welcomes All

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In his book, *Fear of the Other*¹, retired Methodist Bishop Will Willimon shared this story by Pastor Tom Long, who tells a story about his boyhood Presbyterian Church in Georgia when a man in shabby clothes ambled into their church during the service one Sunday. Tom tells it like this. "Perhaps he was a drifter passing through, or maybe he had jumped off a boxcar on the nearby tracks, up to no good, planning to prey on people while their guard was down at church.

All they knew for sure was that he wasn't one of them.

The ushers stepped aside as the stranger entered. He was handed a worship bulletin, but not graciously. He sat by himself in a pew toward the rear. Throughout the service, the pastor and worshippers cast nervous glances in his direction, wondering how he might disrupt their worship. When the offering plates were passed, folks suspected that the stranger might take something out of the plate, rather than put something in. After listening to the sermon, the man arose and quietly departed.

Though Tom was a child at the time, he recalled that after service the Georgia farmers stood under the big oak in the churchyard, talking in serious, muted tones. "They probably didn't know how to say it," says Tom, "but

everyone knew that God had put our church to the test. And we had flunked.” Tom frequently retells this story because he knows that it is at the heart of what it means to be best friends of Christ and, at the same time, his most disappointing betrayers.

Willimon goes on to say, “In presenting our church with sisters and brothers whom we fear as the Other, God is not only testing us but giving us a gracious opportunity to recover the adventure of discipleship.”

In our lesson this morning we watch and listen as Peter shares a similar story with those in his circle who questioned his actions as being unclean or unacceptable. A story of an encounter with the Holy Spirit and with those whom he deemed unworthy of his love and attention and how he was faced with the opportunity to let his walls down, let his boundaries expand to include those whom God Loves. And by extension, it is our story too.

This is a story that brings us face to face with ourselves and asks us to look at and consider the ways in which we too, put up boundaries and walls between ourselves and God’s children. What keeps us from seeing others as children of God even when the Spirit moves us to do so? In our society today, much like the society in the time of Peter, believers have some very strong feelings regarding not only what is right and what is wrong, but who is right and who is wrong.

This vision confronts Peter and us with an upsetting reality regarding our relationship with people unlike us. Those “others” in the world or in our neighborhood who don’t think as we do, or look like we do, or act as we do, or believe as we do!

The Reverend Richard Game shares these thoughts in his commentary. He says, “In our passage from acts, the blanket from heaven carried with it the promise of God’s unimaginable generosity for all humankind. God’s blanket was blotting out the boundary between Jew and Gentile, a boundary that God found unnecessary.

What God had made clean was clean indeed. But the thought of crossing that boundary and being among the unclean was repulsive to Peter. Tradition and laws around ritual cleanliness made table fellowship with the Gentiles strictly taboo. For Peter, Gentiles were as unclean as the weird cuisine in the dream. Peter refused God’s invitation to get up and eat three times. Earlier in Acts, we learned that Peter awoke pondering the meaning of the dream, but remained frozen at least at first, behind an invisible fence buried deep within the precognitive, reptilian part of his brain. Aren’t we all bounded by walls and invisible fences? I know that I am.”

We live in a time and place where the rhetoric of our public and religious discourse centers around making people afraid of those who are different. We want to build walls rather than bridges. We want to keep those who might harm us out of our country and possibly out of our churches and neighborhoods. We label them as un-American, un-Christian, unclean, terrorists, radicals, and other names unfit to be spoken.

A similar distinction was being made even in Peter’s day between those who were circumcised and those who were not. And I want you to consider for a moment that if you and I were living in those times it would be we who would be considered the outsiders and we who would be considered profane and unacceptable, even though we feel now that the same spirit that called those disciples also called us.

And so I have to ask myself the hard question, “am I repeating this same behavior? Am I, or we, as the dominant religious organization denying the work and call of the Holy Spirit in this time and place? Who is on your sheet of those deemed unacceptable? And are we willing to listen to the nudging’s and visions of the Holy Spirit and open the way to accept others into our midst? Will we welcome them into the church and our daily lives? When did we, like the other disciples in this story, get so full of ourselves? And when did they? How quickly they seemed to have forgotten who Jesus ate with! Sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, Jews and

gentiles, clean and unclean, saints and sinners alike. He healed lepers and a hemorrhaging woman. He got schooled by a Samaritan woman about breadcrumbs, he praised the faith of a centurion, he welcomed and open his arms to all who sought him and never once turned anyone away. And it is these remarkable encounters with the “other” the “stranger” that defines not only who Jesus was, but who we should be as well.

It was only a couple weeks ago that this same Peter was being asked by Jesus if he loved him. And if he did then he should feed his sheep, tend his lambs, care for all God’s creation and yet here we are with a mindset that seems in many ways to defy the very ministry of Jesus. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, I don’t know if we have the option to exclude others from his love, compassion, and forgiveness. That doesn’t mean that we aren’t being cautious or that we take our personal safety lightly. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have laws and policies in our country. But if we, along with Peter, came face to face with Jesus on the beach or anywhere else for that matter, and He asks us, “if we love him?” How can you respond to that by saying, “Yes, I love you, but I’d rather those sheep stayed over there in that pasture, and stayed out of mine!

Now I know I am pushing the limit here a bit this morning and I apologize if I am challenging your political or religious viewpoint. But I’m getting the strong feeling that God won’t apologize for that. God is going to be “In your face” as they say when you decide to align yourselves with those who would exclude or marginalize those whom God loves. If you are a follower of Jesus, then you will have to come to terms with just who you give your allegiance to. Jesus was always upsetting peoples religious and political ideas which is one of the reasons they killed him. I think this is something we all have to struggle with as we grow as disciples of Jesus and while it is often times difficult, there is hope. Because as is so often the case, God is the one preparing the way and this story is as much about God as it is about us.

At the close of the story, Peter makes a remarkable statement, one that is truly inspired by the Spirit I think, when he says, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

And this is a point that I think we often forget in our zeal to hold on to this divine experience that we think is exclusively ours, and that is this. The Holy Spirit was already at work, not only in Peter’s life but in the lives of those who were seeking him and the message of love that he was entrusted with. The hymn writer got it right when he wrote, “*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God.*” God is the one who is seeking and preparing the way. This is not a story about evangelism but a story of hearing and following the call of the Spirit. You and I are messengers of love and not the conductors of the train. We need to keep our ears and hearts and minds open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in this time and place and not think of ourselves as those who hold or control the love of God. God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, and if you are lucky you will be aware of that when it happens. And this is what happened to Peter this morning I think. He was faced with the overwhelming depth and breadth of God’s love for all people and there was no way that he as a messenger of God’s love and forgiveness was going to hinder that.

I’ll leave you with this beautiful story by poet, songwriter, and novelist, Naomi Shihab Nye. Her father is Palestinian, and her mother is American. It is a story I’ve shared before, but I find it to be a story where differences are set aside, and true Spirit moves in and brings people together rather than apart. She tells it like this.

“Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been detained for four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the Flight Service Person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the

flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly in the best Arabic I knew, which wasn’t that great. The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been canceled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “You’re fine, you’ll get there, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.” We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate.

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere. And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

God welcomes all, strangers and friends; God’s love is strong and it never ends.

All are welcome in the arms of God’s love and sometimes we just need to get out of God’s way and let the Holy Spirit do what the Holy Spirit does. Maybe God is trying to tell us something today.

Because when the world says, “No!” God says, “YES!”
When the world says, “Not yet.” God says, “Right now!”
When the world says, “Shorter.” God says, “Longer!”
When the world says, “Narrower.” God says, “Wider!”
When the world says, “Smaller.” God says, “Bigger!”
When the world says, “Shallower.” God says, “Deeper!”
When the world says, “Punish.” God says, “Mercy!”
When the world says, “Hate.” God says, “Love!”
When the world says, “Just a few.” God says, “Everyone!”

God is relentlessly in love with the world. And thank God for such love. For if the truth be known, all of us, to one degree or another, are on the outside, where it’s cold and lonely, yearning for God to pull us inside and bring us home, make us part of the family. And would you believe there is enough room in his kingdom for everyone? There is room. There is always plenty of room for more. *God’s love is strong and it never ends!* Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹Fear of The Other: No Fear In Love by William H. Willimon, 2016, Abingdon Press