

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Taylor Walker

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This week Jesus says, “As my father has loved me, so I have loved you. And this is *my* commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Now this is the greatest commandment we have – the greatest commandment we have ever been given. And even though these words are written in the gospel, we received this law way before the gospel of John, way before Jesus ever walked the earth. God gave us this commandment in the Torah. In Deuteronomy it is written: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength.”¹ And in Leviticus it says, because of that love, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”²

The greatest commandment is very simple. Because God loves us, so we love others. If we love God, we can show it by loving others. But for generations, since literally the very beginning, we the people of God have asked a quiet little question: who is... not my neighbor? Who is it permissible for me to *not* love? To not include in my community, to not allow into the assembly? Surely there are limits to God’s love. Surely there are limits to who *we*, people of faith, are supposed to love.

Right?

Well, our story today from Acts will help us come close to that question.

Now the book of Acts is one that we have paid very close attention to during this season of Easter. Everything in this book takes place after Jesus has ascended into heaven. Acts is all about the good news of God's love being sent out into the world as Thomas Long says, "gathering under the wings of God's mercy more and more people who have been lost, pushed away, and forgotten."³ Our reading from Acts is about those people – the lost, pushed away and forgotten people – the unlikely neighbors.

But our story actually begins at the beginning of chapter 10, which is never covered in the lectionary cycle, so that's where we're gonna start.

There was a city, northeast of Jerusalem, called Caesarea-by-the-sea. It was a port city, and because of that it was filled with soldiers in the Roman army. There was a centurion living there, an officer in charge of hundreds of soldiers, and his name was Cornelius. Luke tells us that Cornelius was a devout man who honored God with everything he was and everything he had. He gave generously and prayed constantly and, because of him, everyone in his household believed in God too.

Cornelius honored God's commandments. But... he wasn't Jewish, because he wasn't descended from one of the sons of Jacob, and we know he'd never done the ancient conversion-to-Judaism ritual, because he wasn't circumcised. And because he wasn't circumcised, he would never have been able to enter the Temple of God in Jerusalem.

One day, at about three o'clock, the time of day for Jewish ritual prayer, Cornelius was praying. And then he received a vision from heaven. An angel of God appeared and called to him and said: "Cornelius. The prayers you've prayed, and the money you have shared, these have been raised up before God as a sacrifice.⁴ Now, there is man staying by the sea, in the city of Joppa. Send for him, and listen to what he says."

So... Cornelius gathered three of his men, told them everything, and sent them south to Joppa, to find someone... someone named Simon Peter... the disciple of Jesus.

The next day, as the contingent from Caesarea is approaching on foot, we meet Simon Peter. He's climbed up onto the roof of the house to pray, but it's noon, which is time for lunch, so he's hungry. And then something happens... he receives a vision from heaven. He sees the heavens split open, and something that kind of looks like a large bedsheet is lowered down to the ground by its four corners. Inside are all kinds of creatures – all kinds of four- legged animals and reptiles and birds. And then he hears a voice. It says, "Get up, Simon Peter. Kill and eat."

Simon Peter says, "By no means, Lord. I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice commands him again and again he says no. This happens three times.

Can you remember any other time that Simon Peter protested three times?

Finally, the voice says, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.”

Then he woke up.

Now Simon Peter was really confused. He did not know what to make of this vision. And at that very moment, he looked down from the roof and saw there were three men standing by the gate, calling, into the house, “Hello? Is Simon Peter here?”

While Simon Peter was thinking, the Spirit of the Lord said to him, “Look, three men are searching for you. Get up, go down, and go with them, without hesitation, because I have sent them.”

So... he went. And he didn't go alone – there were some other people who went with him, siblings in faith from Joppa, Jewish believers in Jesus. The following day, the whole group of them made it back to Caesarea.

By this time Cornelius was expecting them. He had gathered everyone in his household, plus all of his relatives and all of his friends. When Simon Peter arrived, Cornelius met him at the gate and cried. He fell on his knees at Simon Peter's feet, worshipping him. And then Peter said something very sweet. He said, “Get up. I'm just a person.” And then he offered Cornelius a hand, and together they walked into the house.

Simon Peter saw that there were many people assembled inside, and he said to them, “You yourselves know that is considered improper for a Jew to stay in the home of a gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

One of my favorite verses in all of scripture. “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

Simon Peter continues, saying, “Now, may I ask why you sent for me?”

And then Cornelius told him the story, of an angel of the Lord coming to him in a vision – a story so extraordinary that Simon Peter probably wouldn’t have believed it – if he didn’t have an extraordinary story of his own.

And then Simon Peter says, “I understand now that for God, there is no big difference between us. Rather, in every people, anyone who loves God and honors the commandments is acceptable in God’s sight.

Now, I want us to pause for a second. This moment is absolutely beautiful. This is the moment where Simon Peter understands the truth of God's love. But I would get an earful from Seminarian Nicholas, and I would deserve it, if I didn't underline this right now. This realization is *not* Simon Peter thinking that something is wrong with Judaism.

God has a special relationship with the Jewish people – the people of the Torah. It was true then, and it is true now. And the law that God gave to Moses – not one letter of it has passed away. The covenants that God made with Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and David – those covenants have not and will not pass away.

But... in Jesus... there is a new covenant. This is the covenant that lets us – the gentiles – be inheritors of the promise. In our 1 John reading today there was this beautiful little line: Jesus is the one who came by water and blood. Not by water only, but with blood. Therefore we are God's people, we are inheritors of the promise, not by our own blood, like our Jewish siblings, descended from Jacob, but by God's blood, through Jesus. As we pray at the altar, this cup is a new covenant in Jesus' blood, shed for us and all people for the forgiveness of sin.

In the beginning I mentioned that question about neighbors and who belongs in the assembly of God, who deserves to be included as God's people. And it turns out that we are the unlikely neighbors. We are not the ones the promise was given to at first. But God has claimed us just the same, and as God said to Simon Peter: "What I have called clean, you will not call unclean."

This is the story that Simon Peter gave to Cornelius and his house, and his family and his friends and everyone he worked with and everyone he knew.

He told the story of Jesus, anointed by God to preach peace and love throughout the world, and how his blood was the new covenant for the forgiveness of sin, for all people.

While Simon Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers from Joppa were astounded that the gift of God's Holy Spirit had poured out, even on the gentiles. And then Peter said, "How could anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, for they have received the Holy Spirit just as we have!" So... Simon Peter ordered them to be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ. And then he stayed with them, in Cornelius's house, though it was improper, because what God has called clean let no one call unclean.

I wish we could spend a whole year exploring the book of Acts. The stories in this book cover God's love going so deep and so wide it could never be contained – a love that spills out into the world, a love we can't keep quiet. But for now... this sixth week of Easter... I wonder how this story will change us.

Dear people, now we will have a few moments of meditation. I invite you to close your eyes and wonder.

I wonder... what it could look like to receive a vision from heaven today.

I wonder... who is your unlikely neighbor, in the new covenant of life?

I wonder... what would you do, if the Holy Spirit whispered in your ear:
“You see those people? Don’t hesitate. Get up and go to them, because I
was the one who sent them.”

I wonder.

¹Deuteronomy 6:5

²Leviticus 19:18

³Thomas Long’s comment in *Feasting on the Word*, 5th Sunday of Easter,
Year B

⁴My paraphrase of Act 10:4 based on *JANT* 10:4n.