

Between Them and Us
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Acts 11:1-18

One of the lasting images for me when I traveled to the Middle East last winter was the wall – the security barrier – separating Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem. The sixteen-foot high concrete structures were placed ostensibly to provide defense against violence and terrorist acts. Yet they pose significant problems for Palestinians who need to travel between areas for work or school, isolating their communities and creating a system of checkpoints that are at best time-consuming and frequently degrading. These grey, barb-wired-topped monoliths dominate the landscape and convey a sense of embattlement and division. The poet Robert Frost famously noted that “good fences make good neighbors,” but countered that perspective with an earlier line that says, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall...that wants it down.”

Both sentiments seem universally human. On the one hand, we are the pioneers, crossing familiar boundaries in order to seek new landscapes and learning. On the other hand, we seem hell-bent on marking our territory, gating our communities, putting up “no trespassing signs” to keep out the stranger. Sometimes the barriers are obvious: borders, walls, locked doors. But often they are more subtle: if you know how to speak the language, dress the dress, walk the walk, you’re welcome. If you don’t...well, perhaps you’d be more...hmmm... comfortable somewhere else.

The Church is not immune to matters of identity and membership, and has struggled since Pentecost with questions of who’s in and who’s out. Theological arguments, varying ways of reading and interpreting Scripture, and cultural values have all played a part in erecting barriers to full participation in church life and leadership. The now-decades-old debates in the Presbyterian Church over

ordination of persons with homosexual orientation was preceded by ones about African-Americans, women, divorced persons – and yet still we are slow of heart to accept those who differ from the “norm” established by the dominant group.

The morning text recalls the church’s first controversy over matters of inclusion: what to do about the gentiles. The first followers of Jesus Christ were Jewish, and nascent Christianity was one of several sects within first-century Judaism. Converts continued to adhere to Jewish law, including circumcision of males, dietary regulations, and certain religious practices. But came the day when it was rumored that the gospel had caught hold among Gentiles, which was kind of like saying “the heathen” or “those pagans;” people who practiced a variety of religions or no religion, and were viewed as entirely outside the covenant God made with Israel. The perspective that Gentiles were spiritually “unclean” was reinforced by laws prohibiting social contact and interaction. The borders between the two groups were well-defined and sharply drawn. And then the apostle Peter was heard to have socialized with one, a soldier, part of the Roman military presence in Palestine. When he returned to Jerusalem, he was called before church leaders to account for this trespass. Listen for God’s Word to the church in this time and place, in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in the eleventh chapter at the first verse.

ACTS 11:1-18

The “D” word – it’s everywhere. I’m talking about diversity. Cleveland Heights revels in its identity as “a city of diversity,” yet has found it necessary to wage a civility campaign because of friction among its diverse citizenry, particularly between established residents and newcomers. Schools and businesses hold “diversity training” events, and even the most traditional institutions point with pride to their board and membership composition reflecting a bit of racial, ethnic, or gender diversity.

In some ways Fairmount Church was a pioneer in promoting diversity. In 1964, church leadership very deliberately invited four

African-American couples to join the all-white congregation – the first church in the Heights to become integrated. It's a tribute to the courage and vision of Bea and Win Ritchie and Lois and the late Dr. Esque Crawford that they accepted what was by no means an easy entrée into this faith community. Former pastor Hank Andersen established the first "Diversity Council" ten years later, Kent Organ made diversity one of the hallmarks of his tenure, and in a variety of ways, Fairmount has kept it on the table. Now as we look from our 90th to our 100th anniversary, we must ask again what kind of church do we want to be? Where are the walls we have perhaps unknowingly erected? Dare we risk the vulnerability of an open door, as our logo suggests?

The witness of the early church makes it clear that God does not make distinctions between "them" and "us," between the insiders and the outsiders. When their leadership became concerned about Peter's unlawful actions, he shares his experience of a dramatic vision which he interprets as God's declaration that there are NO unclean persons, that everyone is within the breadth of God's grace. He gets a chance to practice it immediately, when approached by gentiles to come and have dinner with their leader. Understand the significance of Peter's decision – by entering a Gentile home and eating with them, he was setting aside centuries of religious law and authority. You get the feeling that Peter is as surprised as anyone; but when he recognized the hand of God bestowing the same gift given to the apostles, how can he hesitate? He does not want to hinder the Holy Spirit! I've always thought the reaction of the church was the real miracle that day: their arguments fall silent as the truth slowly sinks in: God's love is boundless. They repented of their "gentilephobia," expanded the mission of the church and the proof of that is seen as we worship here today.

Friends, the funny thing about God's Spirit is that it is radically independent of human reasoning and effort. God so loved the world that God didn't send a committee, but a Son, whose Spirit continually surprises the ones who like it decent and in order. While we are busy forming task forces, establishing long-range plans, and conducting studies, that generous and wily Holy Spirit shows up where we least expect and creates havoc.

...well, "havoc" if we think the church has to be the gatekeepers for the Kingdom of God, or that our job is to screen groups and individuals for church membership. Diversity is God's gift to the church, a gift to be savored, one that stretches and enlarges us, and ultimately transforms us. It is a gift God intended from the very beginning when God poured out the Spirit even on the Gentiles. It is a gift to the church today, and one can enrich the quality of our caring and sharpen the effectiveness of our outreach.

What would be a mistake is to reduce diversity to a buzzword or its pursuit as mere "political correctness." We seek connection with others not so much as an exercise in embracing differences, but so that we come to know them so well as to transcend differences. Underneath those differences of color, race, sexual orientation, history, perspective, and all other distinctions, are hearts that beat with longing for God and for community, for truth and justice and peace and love. Underneath the particularity of individual selves lies a common humanity. There is no distinction between "them" and "us."

But because of the layers of distinction we do make, sometimes it is very difficult to get underneath and see each person as she or he truly is. That's why we do have to be intentional about receiving God's gift of diversity. I believe it means listening carefully to the questions and perspectives of one another, and to seek out others not regularly here. It means hearing and taking seriously the experiences of others. I believe it means accepting each person where they happen to be, and leaving judgment to God.

Two weeks ago, a bright and lively class of ninth graders made their first public profession of faith and became Fairmount members. Their faith statements all were memorable, but one stands out in my mind. This young man expressed gratitude for a church “as the one place where I know I won’t be judged.” When I remember the thousand and one ways this young man – and all the others---are judged according to their academic ability, athletic skill, appearance, social status, I rejoice that he has come to experience church as a community of acceptance. Choosing diversity offers freedom from rigidly-fixed borderlines, from the necessity to conform in order to be united. It extends freedom in order to find God in our particular contexts and situations.

It’s like the gift of a book. Reading the book requires time and effort. But if we read it, we may be changed forever. When I meet a person who is different than I, if I take the time and effort to read them, I will be changed forever, sometimes in ways I can’t even imagine. After some years of dormancy, a new Diversity Council is forming, co-chaired by elders Chin-Tai Kim and Steve Minter (speak with one of them or me if you’re interested in serving). They’ve already held a breakfast conversation with a number of our African-American members, to listen and learn. It won’t be the last. And race is only one distinction to bridge. It takes a breathtaking spectrum of color to produce light. In order to be “a light in the Heights” we, too, need a spectrum of persons, reflecting the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love.

Author Marcel Proust observed “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” Christian faith is nothing if it does not give us new eyes for seeing God and seeing, really seeing, one another as brothers and sisters. Here at the Lord’s Table we are welcomed as family, united in Christ. (We’re not united about the way we serve communion, some favoring the elders taking the bread and cups to the people, others favoring the people coming forward. Another example of our diversity!) Today as we receive God’s gifts of bread and the shared cup, I invite you to look around the room.

There are some among us who are strangers; some whose outlook seems “foreign;” there are some we know well enough to have experienced conflict and hurt; there are empty seats that could be filled by some of who have drifted away, and others we have yet to meet. Friends, see with new eyes the body of Christ in its glorious diversity. This meal is a feast to which everyone is invited; where everyone belongs, where everyone is offered the bread of life, the cup of the covenant. Imagine...no distinction between them and us, but all of us, side by side, poor and rich, young and old, female and male, darker skin and lighter skin, homosexual and heterosexual, ill ones and healthy ones, everyone. Together....even to us, God has given blessing and life.

TO THE GOD OF PEACE

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