

Even on the Gentiles
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
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Text: Acts 10:34-48

In his book *Lake Wobegone Days*, Garrison Keillor recounts his school days and the process of choosing up sides for teams at recess. Of course, the popular kids were chosen first, and then the rest, “not so hot” guys were divvied up two at a time, because, he writes, “it makes no difference...sometimes I go as high as sixth [choice], usually later. Just once I’d like Daryl to pick me first. ‘Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes! You! Come on!’” Keillor adeptly identifies the sense of vulnerability inherent in voluntary association at any age, and describes the desire of all who have ever felt we were “not so hot” for belonging. But, Keillor concludes, “I’ve never been chosen with much enthusiasm.”
[Keillor, Lake Wobegone Days, p. 225]

The Christian gospel counters that conclusion: Ah, but you have been! The sacrament of baptism witnesses to God’s enthusiastic choice to call us divine sons and daughters. We are chosen and in symbolic fashion-- akin to the audible voice at Jesus’ baptism-- pronounced as God’s beloved, in whom God is well pleased. The grace of infant baptism flows not from the baby, cherished and precious though she is, but from the heart of God who loves without reservation, without limit, without requiring reciprocal loyalty. Baptism is the Church’s initiation rite, a sign that you are “in” no matter what. You belong.

The Scripture reading this morning from the book of Acts relates the first of the church’s many controversies over the meaning of this radical inclusion. Here the problem is the Gentiles. Recall that “gentile” was a general designation for the people of non-Jewish nations, and is also translated “heathen” and “pagan.” Gentiles practiced a variety of religions, or no religion, and were not part of the Covenant God had made with

Israel. For the faithful Jew, Gentiles were considered spiritually “unclean” and the two groups lived and worshiped separately, strictly minimizing their contact.

The first followers of Jesus were Jews, and at its inception Christianity was primarily a Jewish sect. Converts continued to adhere to Jewish law including circumcision, dietary regulations, and segregated temple worship. The early chapters of Acts fairly burst with enthusiasm as many Jews gladly embraced the Gospel, and the Church grew exponentially. The dynamic new religion did not go unnoticed, and before long, Gentiles began inquiring about this Jesus of Nazareth whose followers claimed him as Savior and Lord. In our text, the apostle Peter is summoned in a dream to the home of Cornelius, a respected Italian soldier. You sense his discomfort as he greets Cornelius, blurting out that it is unlawful for a Jew to “associate with or visit a Gentile.” Yet he does so, in response to what he believes is the very clear word of God that he should not consider anyone profane or unclean. Cornelius tells that he too has felt drawn by divine call to invite Peter to his home. “So now,” he says, anticipation mounting, “all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.” Listen for God’s Word in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles in the 10th chapter at the thirty-fourth verse. [ACTS 10:34-48a]

The arcane issues of the early church might be easy to dismiss if our own were substantively different. But they’re not. The whole Christian Church— including our Presbyterian branch of it, and even this beloved congregation—still struggle with the question of belonging. The eleven o’clock worship hour is still one of the most racially segregated in America. Disagreement about membership and ordination of sexual minorities has become deeply divisive. So we must ask: How wide is our welcome? Who do we want to include? Who is excluded? How do we put the part of our mission statement that calls us to “build a community.... in response to God’s love that transcends all human distinctions” into practice?

The questions have particular resonance because of the location of our church—the place where we were founded and where we have served for 91 years. Fairmount is an integral part of a community that has intentionally sought diversity. We championed that value by being the first Heights church to become racially integrated (in 1964). But over time, our neighborhood has changed. The recent mugging in Shaker Heights has re-ignited fears that racial and economic divisions are too deep to overcome. Better face reality, some say, and stick with your own kind. Can we offer a different scenario—bridging differences and misunderstanding among diverse peoples in a way that will help us thrive together?

I believe so, and I believe not out of some sense of political correctness or liberal persuasion or naïve optimism, but because of the essential identity of the Church. This is the family born of God's love for all regardless of difference. This is the body of Christ, made up of many parts which are needed for its health and effectiveness. This is God's house, which God intended to be a house of prayer for all peoples. The baptism which initiates us into the church is not like the initiation rites of other organizations which confer exclusive privileges upon its members. Our baptism brings us into the most inclusive community, made up of the most surprising people. *Even on the Gentiles . . .* You can hear the apostle's amazement and disbelief at a reality beyond imagining. The ones who were different, who hadn't been chosen first, were welcomed by God with open arms. And what's more, God made no distinction between them and God's first family; or rather, God valued the differences between them, such that the Gentiles did not have to become Jews first, before they were accepted as full members of the family. Baptism is a sign of God's love and acceptance for all. The church exists to extend to others the same sense of belonging and awareness of God's love we experience for ourselves.

There is an interpersonal aspect to embracing such diversity. On one level it is as simple as practicing the Golden Rule—treating others as we wish to be treated. We take extra care in

speaking to strangers who worship here; showing them where the nursery is, or encouraging them to join the coffee hour following worship. It makes a difference---visitors and guests frequently comment on how warm and welcoming you are. Here is another small, but significant way we respond with empathy to difference. Some of our members have food allergies that make eating wheat products impossible. Until this past year, they had to skip communion—one man told me he even mimed taking a piece of bread and consuming it just so he could feel part of the sacrament and connected to everyone else. By offering a gluten-free bread at the Lord's Table now, we demonstrate love to those formerly-excluded members, and become a better church. We can do the same towards persons of different race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other human distinction.

There is also a missional aspect to embracing diversity. Fairmount—and other faith communities—comprise the social capital of a city by investing in ministries to expand opportunities for some who are disadvantaged. The Open Doors afterschool program in our church building, Heights Youth Club on Lee Road that Fairmount founded, and E-Prep School which provides an outstanding education for at-risk Cleveland youth, are excellent examples of addressing needs and strengthening community.

But the importance of embracing diversity goes beyond the treatment of individuals who cross our threshold, and past projects that serve the needs of others. It goes to the very heart of our identity as the church. We also need to consider how our institutional life exemplifies God's universal love and how we express that in church life and as a member of the wider community. Many Fairmounters attended the lecture last Fall by Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, president of Spelman College and author of several books, including one with the title *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Dr. Tatum sensitively yet forthrightly described the racial barriers that still divide us—in public education, in neighborhoods, and in faith communities. She called for

bridging those barriers through practicing the ABCs: Affirming identity; Building community, and Cultivating leadership. In her words,

[People] need to see themselves...reflected in the environment around them...to avoid feelings of invisibility or marginality. . .[they need to feel] a sense of belonging, part of a community in which there are shared norms and values and a sense of common purpose that unites its members. And they need to learn that leadership must come from all parts of our community. Leadership in the 21st century requires the ability to interact effectively with people from backgrounds different from one's own—an ability that requires real-life experience.

[Tatum, Can We Talk about Race? pp. 21-22]

Though Dr. Spelman's particular concern is the re-segregation of public schools, her analysis informs the challenges facing the church as well. How we identify ourselves includes understanding how one's race or ethnicity and sexual orientation shapes us—and others. What it means to be White; what it means to be Black, gay or straight. What it means to be a majority member or a minority member of the community, and to recognize the ways racism, classism, sexism have divided and weakened us. We must acknowledge and honor the different perspectives and experiences of people, in order to truly see what connects us and what we hold in common. For most if not all of us, this will mean listening and learning outside our comfort zone; beyond the reality we think we know.

When we do that, I believe we will discover what the apostle Peter did-- new insight about God's grace to us and to all. Did you notice that the text ends by relating the invitation of Cornelius and his family to Peter and those with him to stay for several days? The barriers that had separated them through long years of religious teaching and practical realities came tumbling down, as they enjoyed meals and hospitality and

growing friendship together under one roof. I'll be Cornelius served pork only once!

Friends, Fairmount's most faithful—and I believe, most exciting moments—are the times when you demonstrate love for one another outside the safe sanctuary, and beyond the friendly familiar faces of the people you already know. Jesus sends us to the city, to the marketplace, to the board room, to the nursing home, to face the broken promises and hard realities of these times and this place. He sends us with a gospel of grace that enthusiastically chooses people of all kinds, countering fear with friendship and division with unity. The opportunity we have to grow—numerically, by welcoming members of our diverse neighborhood, and as a potent force in the renaissance of our critically ill city—has never been greater.

The congregational conversations around diversity that will take place over the next four months are absolutely essential for our growth and health, and I hope that every one of us will participate. What can you expect? Well, you can look forward to rich personal growth as we hone our skills at listening past our differences. We will benefit as a church from open-hearted, honest talk that will reveal both our particular perspectives, as well as the bedrock identity as beloved children of God we share. And I have a feeling we're going to be astounded at the Spirit God pours out.....even on....Fairmount Presbyterian Church. AMEN.

What epiphanies will God send us in this new, uncharted year? Let the first and last one be the revelation of God's unbounded, illimitable love for all the children of the world as we remember how God chooses each one, "You! I want you!

[RENEWAL OF BAPTISM]

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