

“CENTERED LIVING IN AN OFF-CENTERED WORLD:
I – HOW I THINK ABOUT OTHERS”

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World Communion Sunday

Acts 10:9-48

Matthew 22:34-40

Last week, I noticed on Facebook that a few members of our congregation were celebrating their 50th high school reunion from Elkton High School. From all the pictures, it looked like they were having a blast. It made me think back to high school reunions I've attended – which aren't many, to be truthful. I went back for the 5th year reunion, and I had a miserable time. I had graduated from college by then, but didn't have a “career” kind of job yet, I was still trying to figure out what I was supposed to be when I grew up. I wasn't married, didn't have kids. And I went to the reunion, and it seemed to me like everybody had a job, everybody was married, some even had kids already – and I felt like a total outsider. It was not fun at all. All it did was remind me of the days in middle school and high school where there was an “in” crowd and then everybody else – and I was never part of the “in” crowd. And for a young person growing up wanting to be liked (just like every other young person, by the way), that was painful.

You know what, friends? I think since time began there have always been “in” crowds and then everybody else. We come up with this idea that some people are more special, more gifted than others, and those others are left out.

Such was the case in this morning's New Testament lesson from the Book of Acts. For a long, long time, the Jews were the “in” crowd, the only ones that mattered. Peter, the central character in the lesson, was, in fact, a good Jew, a very good Jew. He, as you know, was Jesus' right hand man during his earthly ministry, and it was in Peter's hands that Jesus entrusted the future church.

So it was that Peter was looked to with high regard by many people, and so it was that he shocked the world when he started to reach out beyond the “in” crowd, beyond the Jews, to minister to the Gentiles. You have to understand, this was really shocking in that day and age. After all, the Jews were God's chosen people, and the Jesus movement had started with them, and pretty much stayed with them, and it was supported by those religious laws that stated who was clean and who was unclean.

So the people couldn't believe it when Peter reached out to a man named Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman citizen. Didn't he know he was breaking all kinds of religious laws, not to mention centuries old customs?

Well, yes, he did, but you heard in the lesson why he did what he did. He had a vision from God one day. It was the vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven, filled with animals of all kinds. Then Peter heard a voice say, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." Well, Peter could see that among those animals were those the law said were unclean, so he replied, "No, I have never eaten anything the law says is unclean." And the voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Three times that happened, and then the vision was gone. While Peter's head was probably still reeling from that experience, some friends of a man called Cornelius came looking for him and told him that Cornelius wanted to meet with him. Ordinarily, he might not have gone to meet with Cornelius, because he was not a Jew, but with this vision still in his mind, Peter went.

And when he got there, he told them that it was because of this message from God that he had come, and was sitting down and talking to a Gentile. And that's just what Peter did – he sat down and talked to Cornelius and those with him and told them all about Jesus and his saving love and grace. And, the scripture says, the Spirit descended on those seekers, and the scripture also says that the Jews who were with Peter were astounded that the Holy Spirit had descended even on the Gentiles!

It was a pivotal moment in the life of Christ followers, for it was the day that the idea of an "in crowd" in terms of faith disappeared. The doors of faith were flung wide open and all were invited in. No more "clean" or "unclean," no, all are children of God, all able to hear and receive the saving love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Once the doors were opened, the gospel spread like wildfire, and the church of Jesus Christ spread far and wide.

It's a great story, isn't it? And wouldn't it have been great had that openness continued unabated through the centuries. Sadly, little by little, even in the church, new "in" crowds came into being. We see it later in the New Testament where people argued over who could be leaders, and who was more gifted than others. That's why Paul later has to speak on the importance of everyone's different gifts – because gifts were being ranked in a supposed order of importance, and some people were being left out.

Why do we do that to each other? We still do it today. We still put up these walls between ourselves. Too often, we focus on our differences rather than the things we have in common. And far too often, that focus is negative.

So it becomes rich v. poor, Democrats v. Republicans, liberals v. conservatives, black v. white, citizens v. immigrants, people of faith v. non-believers, and even church attendees v. non-attendees. And the way we treat each other, particularly in this volatile election year, is at times, pretty horrible. The things we say and the things we post on social media are pretty bad.

And I think it grieves God. I truly think it grieves the God who created everyone and everything, that we treat each other so poorly, that we rank each other in order of supposed importance, when for him there is no ranking – all of his children are beloved and of sacred worth.

You know what? I think there were probably people back in Peter's day, onlookers, who, before Peter had that vision, watched Peter and the others and saw them ministering only to the Jews and thought, why would I want to be a part of such an exclusive and excluding group?

And I know there are people in the world today who watch us and perhaps see us being exclusionary or negative about others, and think, why would I want to be a part of that? Actually, I know it is true, because research has been done that shows that young people, in particular, are turning away from church because they see us as being negative – as a group of people who are against a whole lot instead of for people. Rightly or wrongly, that's what they see.

In a good but disturbing book entitled *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church*, author Dan Kimball talks about it. He says that many young people feel that church people are judgmental and inflexible – in other words, they feel like we divide people into “clean” and “unclean” if you will. While we may not see that as true, it's their perception from the things they see going on – like a Baptist Church that very publicly shows up at military funerals and protests carrying horrible, horrible signs, or churches that look down on people with tattoos or piercings, or churches that refuse to allow women in leadership or turn away those who are gay. Those are the things they see going on, and what it says to them, rightly or wrongly, is that the church puts up walls – and those we deem clean are invited in and those that are unclean, we don't.

What do we do in the face of that? Well, we do what Peter did, go out and reach out to everyone. We live out the radically inclusive love of Jesus Christ in all ways – in our worship, in our outreach – in all ways.

Oh dear friends, our world today, especially in this volatile election season, so easily tempts us to be negative, to put up walls, to decide who's in and who's out, to, frankly, not be the kind of people Christ followers ought to be. May we be strengthened for the journey we face by remembering Peter's vision of that sheet. May we remember that God's love is inclusive, that God created all people, and all people are worthy of love, dignity and respect – all people. No, we don't have to agree with everyone on everything, but yes, we are called to love them and treat

them with the dignity and respect every child of God deserves. That is our calling as followers of Christ Jesus.

So today, as you come forward for holy communion, may it be a real reminder that we are in holy communion with all of God's people. We are one, because we are all children of a mighty, loving God.

May this holy communion renew in us the desire to love as Jesus loved, and to spread that love to all people, in all the ways we can. May it be so.

Amen.