

Why This Church? Acts 10:34-43

Last week, we discussed together about why it is that the church itself is important for Christian faith—being a place where in community building and our community doing, we show the world an entirely different way of being through the name of Christ. We talked about how at its best, the church is the place where God’s kingdom comes on earth and our hands and feet are used for God’s good purposes in the world. And, we talked about the hope for the Church universal as people of faith contribute their gifts to its being.

Yet, I said very little about the particulars of this congregation, how we as the people of faith gathered here each Sunday morning at 1615 Washington Plaza fit into this story.

What is it that we have to offer as a local church to the larger Body of Christ? Why are we important?

Why should we keep working diligently at the sometimes difficult task of being a church that leaves a legacy of faith for future generations?

Speaking to these specific questions is the entire purpose of my sermon today—a sermon that I hope will encourage the goodness of God that shines so brightly here as well as challenge us about the seriousness of the journey in our future.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, we have the opportunity to peak in at a huge moment on the faith journey of Peter once again. A moment that I believe (if we look at closely) will help us know how God might be encouraging us as a church that we are doing some good things.

As we have been talking about all month, Peter’s path of faith was righteous early on. He was among the first of the disciples to publicly define how you could remain a good Jew and still follow Christ. Yet, his preaching and teaching had one primary audience: the Jews. Peter insisted that following Jesus meant still following the Jewish law—including eating foods according to the Law of Moses and worshipping in the temple.

However, the story in Acts 10 emerges as a turning point for Pete. As he was going about his devout practice of praying on the rooftop, he fell asleep. God tells Peter three times to get up and eat what Peter knew contraband foods in the Jewish

law. Of course he objects, saying, “By no means Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” Yet, the Lord tells him to eat for the foods are now clean. And just as Peter is in the process of scratching his head wondering what just happened, a delegation of men arrives to see him from the house of Cornelius. The men invite Peter to go Cornelius’ home in Caesarea, a thoroughly Gentile city.

So, what happened in a matter of minutes was weird. Jews just didn’t go to social events with non-Jews out of fear of the “uncleanness” of the Gentile’s home. The risk of religious impurity was at stake, so it just wasn’t done.

But, Peter was on his way. God’s Spirit told him it was going to be alright. It was a calling of the Divine’s doing. Yet, I know as Peter made this long journey; thoughts must have been going through his head like:

“What I am thinking hanging out with these Gentiles?”

“I’m sure I’m going to be the laughing stock of the disciples and my friends from the temple when I get back!”

“I know everyone is going to think that I’ve lost my mind going all this way to see this Gentile man I’ve never met: Cornelius!”

This is probably why we hear Peter telling Cornelius and his loved ones upon first meeting them that: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile.” Peter sets some boundaries in the beginning, so that Cornelius’ family knew what kind of devout person they were dealing with in talking to him.

However, it is important to note here that Cornelius wasn’t your average non-Jew. He is cited in Acts 10:2 as “a devout man who feared God with his entire household, who gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” Cornelius loved God!

And, as Cornelius begins to share about his faith—Peter had quite a moment of epiphany. This is where we find our text for this morning picking up in verse 34 as Peter addresses the crowd saying: as one modern translation puts it: “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.”

Let me stop and read that again. “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.” Do you hear how powerful Peter’s statement truly was?

And in that moment of declaration, I believe a whole new way of seeing the world came about for Peter. Peter knew his theology had to change. He saw that the gospel was not only for those who spoke, acted, or lived as he did. He gained a friend from a different tradition than his own. And, he received from Cornelius, who was previously the kind of person he would not associate with in a religious sense, a greater understanding of what having a relationship with God meant: “God shows no favoritism.” God’s invitation of relationship was for all people, it wasn’t about the code of law anymore.

So, there was nothing for Peter to do besides give testimony to who he personally knew Jesus to be: Lord of all! And if we finished reading the chapter, we would discover that amazing spiritual electricity lit up the room. The Holy Spirit came upon all who heard Peter and the entire household received the baptism in Christ’s name. Peter’s faith was changed. You could say that he had an “inclusive conversion.”

At a previous congregation, I was assigned the same text for this morning, and hardly slept at all the night before I had to preach it. I was afraid that what I knew I had to say about it might get me fired. You see, because in reading and studying this text as I have just presented it to you, it was obvious to me that the call of Christ is one of inclusion. A non-Jew in Jesus’ day was considered to be an outsider, yet Christ was calling Peter to accept. And the same message, too translates to the “outsiders” of our time: that no matter what your race is, no matter what your religious background is, no matter what your sexual orientation is, no matter what that God loves you and wants you to know about this love. Yet, this is just not the way most modern churches function including the one I served at the time.

As marvelous as the stories of healing, peace, and justice which we find in the gospels about Jesus are, what you find in many churches today is completely different. For many faith communities the message is: come be like us, follow our interpretation of scripture, come fit in, and don’t dare to be question — because we don’t know how to deal with unanswered questions.

And while this way of being church works for many people who want a scripted pattern of what knowing God will be like (and I respect these folks as my brothers and sisters in Christ), such kinds of churches just don't work for everyone.

These kinds of churches don't work for the person who has an imperfect family.

It doesn't work for the person who has doubts about their faith from time to time.

It doesn't work for the person who believes in the priesthood of all believers.

It doesn't work for the person who is told he or she is evil because of their sexual orientation.

It doesn't work for the person who believes in diversity.

So, enter into the picture, Washington Plaza Baptist Church. A community that was founded as Baptist congregation, but where all the first residents of Reston knew they were welcome.

A community that has historically stood up for justice—affirming the gifts of women in ministry, helping the homeless, celebrating beautifully great Civil Rights workers of our time like Martin Luther King, Jr. and welcoming any who come in these doors.

A community where you don't have to have agree with everyone else to be accepted. A community unlike any other in Reston and I dare say in the Northern VA area—so much so that we have regular attendees who drive miles each week to be a part of what we are.

A community where you can come with all your questions, all your uncertainties, all your burdens and find hope that there are people here who love you and want to care for you.

My new friends, this is what being church is all about. This is the kind of church that I knew I wanted to be the pastor of. This is the kind of church that I am proud to be the pastor of. This is the kind of church that the community needs to know is here.

So, why this church? Our mission focused on service and justice, our welcoming fellowship, our hopes for being an even greater presence in the Lake Anne

neighborhood is exactly what Reston needs. We are the only Baptist presence of our kind in Reston!

This is a truth I believe with all my heart: our church is exactly what so many people are looking for, yet they are sitting at home this morning thinking it doesn't exist.

We are not a congregation that looks exactly like our neighboring churches. We are not repeating something for the 20th time that has already been done. We have great purpose in our uniqueness. We are living the dream of what so many great saints of the past wished they could see.

And though we may not be the type of congregation that grows to have thousands of members one day with our own parking deck, it doesn't mean that we aren't important. It doesn't mean that we aren't doing something very valuable and needed for those who choose to join us.

We are, my friends, in our existence, living and sharing with others, Peter's proclamation: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

This is the message God has given us to share with the world that even as we face this New Year with all its problems, all its hurts, all its collapsed dreams— our community has the answer: love. Just as the American journalist turned social activist for the poor and homeless, Dorothy Day once said: "The only solution is love," so this church must continue sharing this message. Our doors need to be open to provide such a hope.

How will then, people know that we exist? Why will this church have a future?

"They will know we are Christians by our love."

No matter what we face in our future- it is our love that will continue to allow us to shine. Our love will make all the difference. Our love will bring new people to us. Our love will help us meet community needs. Our love will carry us on for years and years to come.

Thanks be to God for such a love and such a beautiful community to live out our faith.

Amen.