

Easter 5 (C)
May 2, 2010
Text: Acts 11:1-18

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Open (with arms out, hands open outward). Closed (with arms crossed, with hands pushing away). I imagine that every one of us knows the difference: what it is like to be welcomed (arms open) and to be not welcomed (hands pushing away); to feel that a community, or a situation is open for us, or not; to feel there's a place for us, or not; to be on the inside, or outside. Our Bible story this morning from Acts tells how the first followers of Jesus wrestled with the question of openness, with the question of how open the community of Jesus should be. This is one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible, because this story is all about there being a place for me, a place for you.

To appreciate this story, we need to remember that Jesus was Jewish, and all of the first followers of Jesus were Jewish. And the dividing line between the Jewish people and everybody else—the Gentiles—was well defined. The Jews followed strict religious laws that kept them separate from gentile culture. They required circumcision. They didn't eat pork. They regarded Gentiles themselves as "unclean." To enter a Gentile's home or to share meals would be contaminating. Even early followers of Jesus saw Gentiles this way.

In spite of this kind of judgment, though, some Gentiles were still attracted to Judaism and Christianity. They were willing to put up with the judgment of being second-class people because they found pagan culture, with its many gods, to be morally confused. They were drawn to Israel's faith in one God and the prophets' call to a life of justice and compassion and integrity. Those Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism could have overcome that second-class status by converting, but few did. They weren't ready to eat kosher and observe the Sabbath, and the men certainly weren't ready for circumcision! So most Gentiles attracted to Judaism settled for being what were called "God-fearers." They attended synagogue, they prayed and listened to Scripture, but never became full members of the Jewish community. They never made the full step from outside to inside.

This became a serious issue for the early Church. Remember that the earliest Christians were all Jewish. They worshiped in the temple. They observed Jewish law. And many felt that if any Gentile, anyone who wasn't Jewish, wanted to become a part of the community of Jesus, they needed to become Jewish first. But the Spirit of God had something different in mind. God was ready to begin creating a community of Jews and Gentiles joined together in Christ, a community where there's a place for everyone.

Cornelius and Peter are the two main characters in this story. Peter was a Jewish Christian. Cornelius was Gentile, a centurion in the Roman army, and he was a God-fearer. He was open to Jewish faith and open to following Jesus, but not willing to convert to Judaism in order to join the Christian community. And before they ever met, the Spirit began to prepare both of them, to open their hearts and minds to something new. Cornelius received a vision with a straightforward command—send for Simon Peter, who is in Joppa. Peter received something more...interesting—a strange vision of an immense sheet, filled with all sorts of animals, lowered from heaven, with the command, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat!” Peter protested that some of the animals were forbidden by Jewish dietary laws, and that he’d never eaten anything unclean. But the heavenly voice insisted, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.” This strange vision stayed with Peter until suddenly, while meeting Cornelius, he realized what it meant. The non-kosher animals were symbolic of Gentile people. God’s message was: There are no unclean people in my sight.

And Peter got that message, that God wanted to make Jews and Gentiles one in Christ. I love Peter’s response: “Well, who was I to get in the way of what God was doing?!” So Peter willingly baptized Cornelius and his whole family. Even those who had questioned why Peter would do such a thing ended up giving praise to God, recognizing that God was up to something greater than anything they had ever imagined before. And the Church began a long, often uneven, journey toward becoming something new and beautiful in the world—a community that is open for everyone, where everyone is invited into life with God.

It’s not that we do this perfectly. It’s easy enough to think of so many ways in which the Church fails to fully embody the desire of God to gather all people in an embrace of love. The Church itself can become an obstacle, so that those who need God’s love and forgiveness are unable to hear Jesus’ welcome to them. It seems that almost any time the Christian Church makes it into the newspapers, it’s because of human limitations and failures—whether it’s pedophile priests, or judgmental televangelists, or some Christians’ words of condemnation and hate for people who are gay. Those stories, and way too many more, make headlines because people are rightfully sensitive to this dissonance, when Christians preach a word of love, but then fail to live in a way that reflects that love.

But there are other stories that could be told, about churches that strive to show God’s love in what they do, who step out and take risks in order to be a place that is open for all. Maybe it is putting out money and energy to build a ramp, so that people who use walkers and wheelchairs have access. Or the action our ELCA took this past summer, opening access for gay and lesbian believers to serve as leaders in the church. Of course, there’s a cost involved:

\$30,000 for a ramp, or the current Churchwide conflict where some individuals and congregations have left the ELCA. But love always has a cost. There's a cost that comes with that willingness to say, "We're not closed. We want to be open to all people." That's the kind of church we want to be.

We're not there yet. We still have a long way to go, as the Church and as individuals. But God's Spirit is also still at work. What the Spirit of God was accomplishing in Peter's life was nothing less than a conversion, from one way of living to something new. And God is continuing that work in every generation. Some of us can probably think back over the course of our lives and think of some of the attitudes and prejudices that have changed—if not completely, at least in significant ways... racial prejudices, attitudes toward women in leadership, toward gay and lesbian Christians being more fully welcomed into the life of the Church. We need to be open to the magnificent conversion God is continuing to work in us.

Why is it important? Because there are God-fearers all around us, people who are searching, who feel attracted to Jesus' message of forgiveness and hope, and who are fed up with the me-centered moral confusion of our culture. They haven't found something that feeds their spirits elsewhere, but they wonder whether the Church is safe. They wonder about the boundaries around the Christian community, whether those boundaries might keep them out, whether there's a way for them to come in. It would be unspeakably sad if we human beings were to get in God's way of bringing forgiveness and hope to every person. Like Peter said, who are we to get in the way of God, when there are people hungering and thirsting for God's saving love?

I wonder who in your life do you see hanging around the fringes of faith: hungering, curious, someone who could use God's love. I wonder who needs to know why your faith is important to you, who needs to know that God's love is for them, that they will never be considered unclean in God's eyes, but instead will be embraced forever by God's steadfast and forgiving compassion. I wonder who might be thinking they were unclean or unacceptable, in God's eyes, or the church's eyes? Who is standing on the outside today, who needs to be welcomed in? We pray for Peter's openness. And for God's Spirit to keep on converting our hearts, so that the community of God's people can always be a welcoming and healing place. Thanks be to God. Amen