



All Are Welcome

Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado — Sunday, August 25, 2024

Acts 10:34-43: Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (CEB)

Please, pray with me:

O God, as the Apostle Peter came to understand, you show no partiality to any one group of people, but through your divine love and mercy, you call all to encounter the transformative love you offer to those created in the divine image. As we enter this time of preached word, open our minds, eyes, and hearts so that we may know you more deeply, be transformed by your grace, and go forth into the world proclaiming your good news to all. In Christ, we pray. Amen.

Today we close our sermon series, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Through the last few weeks we have heard sermons that have invited us to consider what it means to be a “good neighbor.” We heard the call of Jesus to love God and neighbor. We heard the story of the Good Samaritan, and last week, through the story of Ruth and Naomi, we considered what it means to be a neighbor to people whom we love and care for.

Today we arrive at our final stop and our text invites us to once again face an uncomfortable truth. Our text today calls us to realize that we are biased people—every single one of us. Our life story, our upbringing, our education, and our social environment shapes our perspectives about others and influences how we see the world. I know this can be a difficult subject and your first reaction may be to deny this reality. But whether our biases manifest themselves

consciously or unconsciously, our experiences are an integral part of our uniqueness and they indeed affect how we see others and how we interact with them in the world. I believe there is a great danger in dismissing this truth or in believing it to be unreal. There is danger in pretending that we can see the world with pure eyes, ignoring the fact that what we do is heavily influenced by our personal experiences. If we cannot recognize the barriers raised between us and others, we will not be able to be neighbors and to love others as God loves us. As with all the things we have talked about thus far in this series, this work is not easy, but as we saw with Peter in our text, transformation is possible and we too can arrive at a place where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can declare, “God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another.” Therefore, in Christ all are welcomed. All are invited. All are accepted.

This seems like a simple lesson, but at times it can be difficult to see others in their full humanity and to love them as we have been loved. The Apostle Peter faced this very issue. I love Peter. He is one of my favorite people in the Bible. I love Peter not because of his eloquence, his fishing skills, or his leadership role in the early church. I love Peter because he comes across like a regular person, who, much like the rest of us, is just trying to figure out life. The Gospel of Luke tells us of Peter’s first encounter with Jesus. After having fished all night and caught nothing, Peter lends his boat to Jesus so he can teach the crowds. When Jesus was finished teaching, he said to Peter, “Push out into deep and let your nets out for a catch.”¹ What did Peter have to say? He said, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I’ll drop the nets.” I know I am inferring here, but this sounds like an answer you give to somebody when you know they are wrong, but you don’t have the energy to argue. You could say Peter just acted in faith, but maybe Peter was a little passive aggressive—maybe he wanted the opportunity to say “I told you so.” There is something about Peter’s personality that shows great authenticity. When Jesus walked on water, Peter again, shows that he is just a regular person. As the disciples trembled in fear, thinking Jesus to be a ghost, Peter looked up and said, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”² I have to say, that’s genius! He saw an opportunity and probably without thinking jumped at the chance to do something amazing. I could go on and on but Peter, through his actions, shows that he is doing

¹ See Luke 5:4

² See Matthew 14:28

the best he can with what he's got and like the rest of us, he was a product of his time and culture.

The difficulty we often have living in this world, is overcoming the things we have been conditioned to believe. As I've said earlier, we may try and work to look at the world with pure eyes, but the truth is we primarily see things through the lens of our experiences. The world looks differently for each of us and that is not a bad thing. We are unique and that uniqueness is expressed in all that we do. At the same time our faith calls us to add the primary lenses of love to our living in the world—love of God and love of neighbor. The lenses of love can free us from the walls we build around ourselves and move us towards “the other” even when we feel uncomfortable.

You may be familiar with this story from the Early Church. As persecution begins in Jerusalem, the disciples scatter beyond the familiar surroundings we hear about in the Gospels. Peter finds himself in Joppa and is tasked with stepping outside the boundaries of his faith and cultural upbringing so gentiles may hear the word of God. Joppa is not a trivial detail. Hearing that name Joppa may bring to mind a prophet—that is Jonah—who was called by God to go to a foreign people and preach God's salvation. Peter's story and Jonah's story share some of the same features and message. Earlier in Acts chapter 10, Peter finds himself at the intersection of right belief and right action. He sees a vision where unclean animals are placed before him and he is commanded to kill and eat. His religious teaching clearly states that he would defile himself by doing such a thing. The right thing to do was to refuse and that is exactly what Peter did. He responded by saying, “Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”³ His vision, which initially seemed to test his faithfulness is turned on its head and now he must face a new reality that radically challenges the ingrained assumptions he had lived with his entire life. This man, who had walked with Jesus and was a faithful Jew had to unlearn the teachings that some things and some people are outside God's love and grace. Peter had to contend with the same reality Jonah had to deal with, that he served a God who was in the business of inclusion and liberation.

³ Acts 10:14, CEB

But here is where these two stories go in their separate ways, for though Jonah understood God to be gracious, merciful, loving, and forgiving he was not willing to live with the outsiders who now, like him, were recipients of God's mercy. Jonah told God, "if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!"⁴ There is something really alarming about Jonah. I suspect that somehow, he was able to separate the commandment to love God and the mandate to love others. There was something off balance about the way he lived his life. There was something within him that still needed sanctification. There was a journey not yet taken that could lead to a place of rejoicing and celebration for God's love for all people. There is no question that Jonah was a prophet. There is no question that God spoke to him. But, in no way that signifies that Jonah was living in harmony with God's commandments or truly doing God's will. Jonah had not yet reached perfection. Jonah still had a lot to learn and he had a long journey ahead of him.

Peter, on the other hand, takes a different approach. Though he was puzzled by the vision; though he did not understand the command to do something that was unlawful; though his religious upbringing created barriers between him and others; though he did not understand what God was up to; he chose to journey beyond his limitations and partner with God's action in the world. Peter, who had walked with Christ and had received the Holy Spirit, still needed to journey within himself to fully understand that Christ is Lord of all. Peter's experience helped him to see that Christ's entrance into the world was not to save a select few, but so that everyone who believes in him may receive eternal life.

I strongly believe that confronting our biases is one of the most difficult things we can ever do. The difficulty in this confrontation comes from within ourselves, for these things are often connected with cherished beliefs, or to a common way of living. So, Peter encounters Cornelius, an outsider, a Roman Centurion—the symbol of oppression for his people. Peter recognizes and proclaims the unusual nature of this interaction when he says, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile."⁵ But God is at work and Peter needs to decide whether he will join the work or stand on the side lines.

⁴ Jonah 4:3, The Message.

⁵ Acts 10:28

Too often we find ourselves in similar situations to where Peter finds himself. God is moving in the world, and God's work is beyond our comprehension. We encounter individuals that, we have been told, stand outside God's grace. People who though are upright and God-fearing may have been told they do not belong. People, who like Cornelius, have heard the voice of God and are following God's will. These are people who have been accepted by a God who called them into being, a God who loves them, a God who desires their wellbeing, and calls them into relationship. "God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another." God calls all people, all people, all people, to relationship. Peter came to understand this and as he shared his encounter with the church in Jerusalem he said, "who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"⁶

This passage tells us a beautiful story of love... A story that reminds us that all of us are loved by God for who we are and not for what we do. As we have been alluding to Fred Rogers, through this series, I thought it would be appropriate for us to close with his words and thoughts. He wrote a song titled, "It's you I like" and in the song he said, "When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed."⁷ Fred Rogers seems to have the deep understanding that God looks within our hearts, the things that we all have which are similar and not that which differentiates us one from the other.

It's you I like,

It's not the things you wear,

It's not the way you do your hair

But it's you I like

The way you are right now,

⁶ Acts 11:17, NIV.

⁷ Fred Rogers' 2002 Commencement Address.

The way down deep inside you

Not the things that hide you,

Not your toys

They're just beside you.

But it's you I like

Every part of you.

Your skin, your eyes, your feelings

Whether old or new.

I hope that you'll remember

Even when you're feeling blue

That it's you I like,

It's you yourself

It's you.

It's you I like.

I had to wonder for myself, who was in need of transformation in this story? Though Cornelius and his family received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it was Peter who was transformed. This is a surprising development. Peter had walked with Jesus, he witness firsthand the miracles Jesus performed, he ate and drank with the risen Christ, and he was a recipient of Christ's commandment to "go make disciples of all people." Still, he needed to grow in his understanding of God's radical love for all.

My prayer for us, is that we will continue to grow in understanding that God loves all people. May we continue to grow in our love for God through visible expressions of love for others. May

we grow in understanding that though the world places barriers us and others, our faith challenges us to move beyond these barriers so we may love “the other” as God loves us. May we grow in the likeness of Christ, who entered into the chaos of our existence and loved us with his whole being. May we be good neighbors, and when we see one who stands along, may we reach and say, “won’t you be my neighbor.”

Thanks be to God.