

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on May 18, 2025

[Acts 11:1-18 / Psalm 148 / Revelation 21:1-6 / John 13:31-35](#)

May I speak, and may we all hear and learn,
through the power of the Triune God:
Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier.

Who here has had someone at your dinner table at one of the Big Two family holidays – Thanksgiving and Christmas – who were *not* members of your family in some way? Perhaps someone who wasn't even a close friend, but who had nowhere else to go for the holiday? And who *has been* that person at the Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner table who wasn't part of the inner circle? Having a complete stranger at the table is easier: someone brings a +1.

I'm glad to see such a positive response. It demonstrates our hospitality. There is something very American about welcoming the less familiar around our dinner tables, especially during the two holidays that involve a closer set of family and friends than, say, the Memorial Day BBQ. You may have even gained a good friend through that open invitation to someone whom you otherwise may not have had the opportunity to engage with so intimately.

This is *not* a universal trait. During my time in the UK, Christmas and Boxing Day were very much reserved for the closest of family and friends. Even the idea of a dinner party – for those of the middle and working classes – was unheard of until a popular TV show made it socially acceptable. But still, those around the table would be well-known to the host, and a +1 was frowned upon until near the end of my time there.

But our story in Acts indicates a type of *Radical Welcome* that – both spiritually and interpersonally – was unheard of in the Apostolic Era. Peter's evangelism to the Gentiles opened up a huge new mission field, and it brought down the

barriers of segregation and elitism. Peter didn't just meet, greet and baptize the Gentiles from Caesarea; he ate with them. And he didn't just eat with those who were culturally and religiously different than he – *he ate foods that his faith deemed unclean!* This story contains truly remarkable activities, and it is a shining example of how radical the Jesus Movement was and is, and how we are called to extend *Radical Welcome* to 'The Other' in the living out of our faith today.

In her book of the same name, Canon Stephanie Spellers defines *Radical Welcome* as:

...a fundamental spiritual practice, one that combines the universal Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality with a clear awareness of power and patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Radical ... amplifies the welcome, broadening and deepening and launching it to the next level. It also indicates a deep, fierce, urgent commitment to some core ideal.

She defines The Other as:

...at once a full, complex, individual human being with a unique story and perspective and a member of a larger group that exists within the social hierarchy.

And The Other is not part of the dominant group within that social hierarchy. Spellers takes us through the work of Radical Welcome of The Other within our congregations. She asks us to look at our parish dynamics and structures through the lens of The Other and discover how we can be a community of Radical Welcome. And of course, Radical Welcome – the self-evaluation and the actual welcoming of The Other – is rooted in Jesus' love – like welcoming that person whom you don't really know to your Thanksgiving table. He gives us this new commandment in today's Gospel – which, by the way, is in the context of His most sacred meal – to love one another:

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

As you know, I'm very interested in the spirituality of the preparing and sharing of food. Like when Peter ate with the uncircumcised, deeply powerful spiritual moments can arise when people share food. At its simplest, sharing food is an opportunity to pause with others and share in what all of us must do daily. At its most profound, meals can forge friendships, seal business deals, host marriage proposals, celebrate all sorts of occasions, and even heal wounds. And at its most holy, sharing the Eucharistic meal is where we meet Jesus.

In Peter's story, it is through the setting of a meal that the Gentiles from Caesarea come to know Jesus Christ. All over the world, we use meals as tools in forming relationships. As Christians, we share food for 3 specific reasons:

- *We use meals to draw people in and to help form community.*
- *We use meals to celebrate God's abundance.*
- *We use meals to remind us of Divinity and to foster faith.*

Peter's meal with the Gentiles accomplished all of that. It might have been that the meals that the circumcised believers also included the Eucharist. Peter would have been a part of the origins of our Eucharistic celebrations. Of course he was at the Last Supper, and he a key driver of the "*Do this in remembrance of me*" movement. Early Christians gathered around a meal. The regular meal was part of their worship, during which they would engage in the Eucharist.

The Early Christians were meeting in one another's homes, typically, the home of the person with the largest dwelling. Christians, Christian Jews and people like the Gentiles from Caesarea would gather in the largest room to share the stories of Jesus' earthly ministry, read some of the writings that we now refer to as the New Testament, and pray with and for one another. They would share a meal together, during which one of their number would recount Jesus' Words of Institution at the Last Supper:

“This is my Body / This is my Blood: Whenever you eat or drink it, do so in remembrance of me.”

The Eucharist, then, was originally much more family-like and involved food on the scale of a meal. The Gentiles were drawn into that practice by the power of God and through the witness of Peter.

Is that something we can do within our own community? Can we practice Radical Welcome of The Other through the sharing of food? What would that look like? Who would The Other look like? Would we have the courage and skill to make Jesus known in the breaking of the bread?

I just got back from Spring Renewal, which I affectionately refer to as Spring Fling – to the annoyance of the Bishop. The theme for this year is *Believing, Belonging, Beloved*. Kicking off the year-long theme in her Convention Address in November, Bishop Lucinda spoke:

- *Of Believing: We know that God brings hope, and we are messengers of that hope.*
- *Of Belonging: The gift of diversity keeps issues of race, gender and language at the forefront, and compels us to address our personal issues of prejudice and bias.*
- *Of Beloved: When we use the phrase “God’s beloved,” we are including in that circle those toward whom we may not particularly feel love.*

Can we practice Radical Welcome to help The Other know the joy of Believing, Belonging, Beloved? God wants us to engage with all of God’s people. To invite, welcome and embrace those who are different takes Relational Courage. Our own Mission Statement calls us to reach out to those who are different than us:

- *In our Welcoming: to invite all to join us at every stage in their spiritual journeys.*
- *In our Worshiping: to cultivate a living tradition of liturgy and a life made holy by the sacraments.*
- *In our Working: to share our abundance, strive for justice, and accept our calling to protect God's creation.*

Yesterday, at Spring Fling, Bishop Barry Beisner, who was ordained here at St Stephen's on May 19, 1979, encouraged us to turn the words of our Mission Statement into a prayer. If we prayed our Mission Statement weekly or daily, would that move us closer to practicing Radical Welcome?

This story with Peter and the Gentiles of Caesarea is a model for how we are to live the Gospel in our diverse and pluralistic world. We are called, as Christians, to sit and eat with those with whom we would never otherwise have anything in common. It sometimes requires being bold and being the first to take the initiative. And it sometimes comes with criticism. But it is the stuff of Jesus Christ, who said:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Radical Welcome starts with the unease you feel about engaging with The Other. Peter was told 3 times to approach the uncircumcised and to eat with them. He was uncomfortable and incredulous of the entire situation. Yet, at the end of the experience, Peter proclaims,

If then God gave them the same gift that He gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?

Who are we to hinder God? Let's explore ways that we might practice Radical Welcome of The Other through the sharing of food. When we invite The Other into table fellowship and share our stories, it will be from their stories that we may be drawn into a deeper understanding of the Love of God. If we endeavor to remain humble, evangelism is never one-way. So, let us bring The Other – the stray at Christmas Dinner – into table fellowship as Peter did with the Gentiles from Caesarea. As in our first hymn:

*As Christ breaks bread and bids us share,
each proud division ends.
That love that made us makes us one,
and strangers now are friends*

If we do this with the commandment to love one another as Christ loved us, maybe, just maybe, we will see that the home of God is among mortals.