



“Inclusive?”

Text: Acts 10:44-48

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Acts is known as Acts of the Apostles, but it could also be known as Acts of the Holy Spirit. While Pentecost Sunday is still two weeks away, and I hope you will all be here for that because it is going to be a wonderful service celebrating the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the worship committee has plans for decorating the Sanctuary for that special Sunday in red, the Holy Spirit is the one who is at work throughout this great book.

For some background leading up to today’s Acts reading, God is working to further the development of the Christian church. To do this, visions are given to both the Apostle Peter and to a Centurion named Cornelius, a Gentile, who is known as God-fearing, and one who prays and gives generously to the poor. In Cornelius’s vision, he sees Peter and is instructed to send for him. Peter is to come to Cornelius’ house to teach him and his household more about God.

Peter’s vision is of animals of all kinds that are considered unclean by Jewish law. In his vision he is told to kill and eat of these meats, an idea that is abhorrent to him. And as he is pondering this vision, Cornelius’ men show up and he goes with them.

Today, we gather to reflect on the message of Acts, where we encounter two distinct groups of people who have encountered Jesus in different ways - those who have been witnesses to Jesus within the Jewish faith, and continue to follow Jewish tradition, and those from every nation who are new to the teachings of Jesus. They are not circumcised. They do not follow Jewish law. Yet these men and women are God-fearing and thirsty to know more about Jesus Christ.

If the Jewish disciples of Jesus went against the leading of the Spirit and didn’t reach out in witness to the Gentiles, then Christianity today would simply be a Jewish sect. But that is never what God intended. So here, in chapter 10, if we’d read the whole chapter, we would have read about Peter’s transformative journey as he realizes that the vision he had indicates that God shows no partiality. This is a big step for Peter in his understanding of what he is called to do and how God relates to people outside of the Jewish faith. All are called together through Jesus Christ, regardless of their background or social status; regardless of whether

they follow Jewish law or not. In Galatians, Paul tells us that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (v.28) in God's eyes. The doors of the church stand open to the world, inviting all to experience the love and acceptance that comes with knowing and serving Christ.

Now I'm sure you're sitting there asking yourselves where I'm going with this because it sounds like I'm going to talk about inclusion and that you are already an inclusive congregation. But I'd like you to think a little more about what inclusivity looks like here and how God might be challenging you to think about how you could be even more inclusive.

I'd like to share with you a conversation I had with someone in this congregation awhile back, also about something I was told, and something I observed, because I think it is worth the sharing to have you consider how you can improve your hospitality to those who are different from you to truly make this an inclusive church.

I think that it is wonderful that the LGBTQ + community has found this congregation a safe place to be. A place to feel accepted and loved by both God and the greater church family. But in one conversation I had with a church member who is part of the LGBT community, they shared that they did not see this congregation as inclusive. Does this surprise you? This person talked from the perspective that for the most part, this congregation is not so inclusive when seen from the perspective that it is a predominantly white and educated congregation. They hoped that the church could be inclusive to those who were not white and not educated; to make this place a welcoming, warm, and safe place for all - regardless of color or education or wealth.

Now you may say of course we would welcome all, but I've seen and been told about churches who have made a shift when people different than themselves came to worship. My friend grew his church from 100 to 700. In the beginning, it was an educated white congregation. However, as he had a heart for mission, and as he and the social justice committee expanded ministry out into the community, working class and poorer people began to come and as they did the educated professional people began to leave. He retired with the attendance still being around 700, but a totally different group of people than had attended when he'd first began his ministry there. Imagine what that church would have been like if those who had means had stayed and really joined in Christian fellowship with the newer poorer members. That is what we read about earlier in Acts when it talks about those who had means, sold what they had so that everyone had food and shelter and were fully a part of the community of faith. The early church was not separated by means or race or education.

I know he found it sad that people left because they didn't like the direction the church was going in, which was just reaching out to people different from themselves. To truly be an inclusive church, a church needs to be one where the welcome goes beyond the superficial level. It has to be the living out of the radical welcome we discussed in our book study. It has to be relational.

At my first interim there was senior housing literally around the corner, but it was subsidized housing. Housing for economically disadvantaged seniors. Many were without close family to help them. The church was full of professionals. One woman in her forties

wanted to start a ministry that reached out to those seniors. We devised a program for seniors and invited the seniors within the church and those in the subsidized housing. Except for a few people from the church, most of the seniors from the church didn't attend. And the seniors from the subsidized housing would come to the church for the programs, but didn't feel comfortable coming to the services on Sundays. But would it have made a difference if the seniors from the church had come and befriended their neighbors and personally invited them to the service? And even invited them to sit with them on Sunday mornings?

The thing that I heard while here, and I don't know the context in which it was said or when it was said, so I will just share the words that were told to me, and that was that the speaker didn't want the service "dummied down". They didn't want the sermons dummied down and they didn't want the music to change. I've thought a lot about that, especially as we've spent so much time thinking about the future of this church and what direction it should go in. So how to extend a radical welcome to help people who are perhaps not as educated, not raised in the church, or who are not familiar with liturgy or traditional church music?

A couple of months ago we had a single man visit for three Sundays. He was clearly not highly educated or a professional, but he got himself here - for three Sundays. I talked with him during the passing of the peace and afterwards and I know that others sitting around him talked with him too. People learned his name and greeted him well each Sunday that he was here - and I thank you for that. I invited him to coffee hour, which he never attended. Perhaps others of you invited him to coffee hour as well. He never went. And, after three Sundays, he stopped coming. I can't tell you anything more about him, because I don't know anything more. Except to ask how might we have connected better with him that he would have kept coming? While I don't know what brought him through those doors on that first Sunday and I don't know why he stopped coming, I'd like all of us to think about how might we be able to connect with someone who is different from our typical attendees, especially someone who might be so unfamiliar with our style of worship?

As I've thought about this, I realized it is not about dummied down the service. I don't think my sermons are so intellectual that the average person can't understand them. And from what I've heard of Kevin's preaching, his sermons were warm, full of humor, and sounded like they were engaging for all. So what I see as the real need in helping new people feel welcome is simply relationship.

Our society has become so isolated and isolating in so many ways. It is why there are so many mental health issues for people of all ages. We all crave that connection with others. It was what God desired for us. It is how God made us - not to live in isolation, but to live in community - to be there for one another in love and care, for support and affirmation, to be shown, not just told, that you matter to not just God, but me as well. It's so much more than a hello and a word of welcome that is a part of radical hospitality.

As you can see, I am not a shy person. I'm very outgoing and talkative. When I've worked as a chaplain, I was free to worship at any church I chose. I remember going to one Presbyterian church, which had about 90 people on a Sunday morning, and I just could not

make any traction with getting to know people. They stayed in their own little clutches during coffee hour and after three months, I decided to try a different church. It shouldn't take so much effort on my part as the newcomer to be welcomed and invited in to the community of faith. I can only imagine how difficult it must be for someone who is shy or more introverted by nature.

The next church I went to was welcoming on day one and every day afterwards. It was a welcome that said, "We're glad you're here and we want you to be a part of us. We want to get to know you. We want you to get to know us. And we want you to know that we are here for you." As a matter of fact, they noticed when I missed a couple of Sundays and chastised me for not contacting the church when I found myself unexpectedly in the hospital and in need of gall bladder surgery. The same day they found this out, at a church dinner, they made a point of presenting me with a prayer shawl, which was part of the ministry of that church. For the next two years, that was my church home.

So going back to our visitor. How could we have made it easier for him to feel welcome? While I have put together a committee to work on that issue and others in regard to membership and outreach, one thing that comes to mind is what would have happened if instead of telling him about coffee hour someone had said, "I'm going over to coffee hour, I would love for you to join me?" Even if you don't normally go to coffee hour, (which to be honest frankly puts me a little over the edge, because coffee hour is one of the places for a church family to build community and I think everyone should be going), and to actually walk with him over to the parlor, spending time talking with him and introducing him to others. And in the process of talking there could be sharing about the specialness of the music and sharing about how this worship service has such meaning to you. You could be helping to educate the person and helping them to understand the things that are possibly so foreign to him. Relationship. The more I think about it the more I am convinced that it is not the message or the music, but the relationships that are made that make a difference. And if we can't go out of our way to extend that radical welcome, to show welcome through taking the time to talk and introduce and most of all break bread together, then there will never be a change in the ministry of any worshipping body.

Acts 10, reminds us of the importance of breaking down barriers and welcoming all into our church community. In a society that often isolates and divides, the church must be a beacon of unity and reconciliation. We are called to extend a radical welcome to all, regardless of differences.

In closing, let us embrace the call to extend radical welcome, foster genuine friendships, and build a community that reflects the love and inclusivity of Christ. May we be exemplary witnesses of God's love and acceptance, reaching out to all with genuine concern and compassion.

May the spirit of inclusivity and friendship guide us in all our interactions, both within our church community and beyond. Amen.