

When Outsiders Become Insiders

Acts 10: 30-35

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I very much regret that I will not be here next Sunday to add my voice of gratitude to my colleague and friend David Bianchin. David and I have been friends for a long time and enjoy, I think, a fine *fine* relationship. It is abundantly clear to me coming in from the outside what a gift David has been to this congregation at this important time of transition. So I really want to give voice to my gratitude for his leadership and my prayer for God's continued blessings on his important ministry. *Let us pray.*

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our hearts and our minds and our wills to the Word you have for us. That hearing we might believe and believing trust you with our lives and our future through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

These Sunday mornings in the summer we've been spending a little bit of time thinking about the earliest Christian church that followers of Jesus – before they even called themselves church – and I've suggested that some of the issues they had to deal with are very relevant issues with which the church still is grappling. The lesson this morning is part of a longer narrative from the Acts of the Apostles. Listen for God's Word. "Cornelius replied four days ago at this very hour at three o'clock. I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, 'Cornelius you're prayers have been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who was called Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon a tanner by the sea. Therefore I send for you immediately and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.' Then Peter began to speak to them, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.'" This is the Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

He sat in my living room with his head in his hands crying. He was a close friend. We met early every summer Saturday morning to play tennis. He was an Elder at the congregation I was serving at the time in Columbus, Ohio. He was a successful businessman, a husband, father of two great children. He and his family were in their pew every Sunday. He called and said he wanted to talk, preferably away from the church office, so he came to our home. We took our coffee into the living room and sat down, and he said, "John, something's wrong. Something's

very wrong. I think I'm gay." Well, I was stunned. It was thirty or more years ago. The thought had never occurred to me. I had grown up with the same stereotypes about sexual orientation as anyone else my age. We didn't say 'sexual orientation' of course – we used much more cruel and derogatory and mean words than that. For most of my life I assumed that same sex attraction was an aberration – a psychological abnormality that had something to do with will and tent and people chose to be that way. When my church began to talk about it and suggested that we ought to be studying and thinking about it, I softened my personal opinion and concluded that it was a kind of illness that would respond to treatment. But here, sitting in my living room, was a challenge to all my assumptions and my certainties. It was clear that he shared some of these certainties – he had reached out for help. He had gone to physicians and psychiatrists, he even signed up for a program that promised to fix him, change him, and reorient him. It was called Conversion Therapy. It didn't work. Nothing worked. He was desperate and he was sitting in my living room with his head in his hands. He couldn't bear the thought of telling his wife, leaving his marriage which appeared to be healthy, and strong and loving. 'What would his children think? What would his church think? What would I think? What would Jesus think?' he asked me. "I can't continue like this," he said. "I've seriously thought about ending my life. It seems some days like that's the only resolution to this."

We talked more, I mostly listened. With the help of another therapist he gradually learned to think differently to stop trying to fix the problem – learn to accept who he was. He told his wife and children and as I suspected they were supportive and with the help of a wise pastor, my successor, he continued his leadership in the church, even though his church (our church) at the time said he was unfit for leadership. Eventually he found someone he loved and wanted to spend the rest of his life with, which he did until he died of HIV aids that he contracted somewhere in the middle of all this.

This is not a unique story, but it is the day my mind changed. I knew him and respect him so deeply that I simply could not dismiss his experience and return to the safety of those certainties with which I had grown up with for many *many* years. I simply could not hold in my mind and hold in my heart what he had just told me about himself and what my church – all the churches at that time – the culture said about him. I've thought and read everything I could find on the subject and prayed and began the difficult and painful task of acknowledging that I had been wrong. That my certainties weren't so certain anymore. I changed my mind. You might even say I was converted. And what did it for me was not liberalism, not social liberalism or political correctness, but my friend and a Bible story. It's the story of conversion – two conversions -

actually there are three characters in this story. First Cornelius a military man, an Officer in the occupying Roman army, a gentile who by story's end will be a Christian, a member of the church. The second character is Simon Peter. We know him he was a disciple and close friend of Jesus. He's now the leader of the tiny community of believers in Jerusalem. He is first and foremost a devout and observant Jew who by story's end will have undergone a conversion himself in regard to his new gentile friend, Cornelius. And the third character – the main character – in this story, the one working behind the scenes to disrupt all the certainties and change and convert the other two characters – the third character is the Holy Spirit. William Willimon, former Chaplain at Duke made a commentary on this story. Calls the Holy Spirit the gracious and prodding one – I love that description of God as gracious and prodding. Well Cornelius, as the story goes, is a good and generous man. He gives alms. He's a God fearing gentile. Cornelius has a dream in which he is instructed to send for a man by the name of Simon Peter, a Jew a follower of Jesus, leader of the Jesus movement. And at that very same time Peter is at his home up on the roof top saying his mid-day prayers getting very hungry, and he has a dream. A sheet is lowered out of heaven, a big tarpaulin and on it are all kinds of birds and animals none of which Peter is allowed to eat because of the dietary restrictions of his religion. A voice says, "Eat, Peter." Peter's horrified, he's disgusted. 'No way am I eating any of those, they're unclean! Everybody knows that! The religious law tells us so.' Peter is faithful to his religious certainties and traditions. But the Holy Spirit is insistent. The vision returns a second time and then a third time – this time with a voice that says 'nothing God has created, Peter, is unclean.'

Well, just then the party Cornelius has sent arrives and Peter does something unexpected and unusual. He invites them to spend the night with him. He's already beginning to break with his tradition. These men are gentiles – they're unclean, you don't do that sort of thing. Next morning after breakfast they set out for Cornelius's home. Remember now Peter and all the first followers of Jesus were Jews. Jesus was an observant Jew. It never occurred to any of them to be anything else. They have not yet started to call themselves Christians, they've not begun to use the word church yet. They're a small movement within Judaism and if you want to be part of them you must obviously become a Jew first with all that entails – the law, the dietary restrictions, circumcision even. The first major issue for the early church was insider / outsider, exclusive / inclusive. Should we allow the gentiles in? Well when Peter arrives he announces that he really shouldn't be there – exposed to gentile and uncleanliness – but he's had that dream three times and that voice. Now Cornelius overcome with gratitude is on his knees thanking God for Peter's presence. So Peter baptizes Cornelius on the spot and suddenly there's a see change, and new

reality – a revolutionary reality. This new thing, whatever it is, is open *to all*. There are no racial or ethnic or national boundaries. Gentiles are welcome too. Wonder of wonders the grace of God in Jesus Christ accepts all, embraces all, even those formerly regarded as unclean.

Well that's the story that sealed the deal for me about my friend and about who was welcome, accepted, embraced by God, who is an insider and outsider in the eyes of God, and inevitably in the eyes of the church. Now our Presbyterian church has had its struggle with this issue. At first the church said that it's not appropriate to ordain to the ministries or to the offices of Elder and Deacon practicing gay man or lesbian. But the issue kept coming up. So we did what Presbyterians do we wrote a couple of study guides, and had conversations and discussions, and Presbyterians lined up on all sides of the issue. There was a lot of heat and anger as well. I had come to believe that the church could come to live with some diversity on this issue. I had become convinced (partly out of my experience with my friend) that sexual orientation alone should not prohibit an otherwise qualified faithful Presbyterian from serving in our church. But when it came time to vote, our General Assembly did not agree. In a moment of supreme irony for me I ended up presiding over the meeting of the General Assembly in 1996 that voted to resolve this issue by writing into the Constitution of the church a provision that specifically forbade the ordination of anyone other than those living in a marriage with a man and a woman, or chastity and singleness. That decision was celebrated by part of our church, and lamented by another part. During that year I was representing the Presbyterian Church USA. I traveled and visited many of our presbyteries and mission partners in this country and throughout the world. And everywhere I went I heard from people who were furious and red faced with anger at me for favoring inclusion, and I also heard from heartbroken Presbyterians – lifelong Presbyterians – who had been told they were not fit for leadership in their own church.

Most painful of all I heard from parents of children who no longer felt welcome in the church that had baptized and nurtured them, and had left the church all together. And I heard from grandparents shaken to the core by what the church they loved had said about their grandchildren. By that time I was one of those grandparents. Fifteen years later after more studying, discussion, discernment, a lot more arguing – passionate arguing – the General Assembly reversed itself, deleted that prohibition and adopted new ordination standards without reference to this topic at all. This time the divide had become so deep, however, that entire congregations started to leave the denomination. Friends of mine with whom I shared decades of ministry pulled out, formed a new denomination. Congregations split. Families that had worshipped in the sanctuary and the pews together for years separated in anger. There's an

ongoing conversation about this topic what Scripture says and does not say. If you are interested I recommend a book by the late Jack Rogers who died himself just a few days ago. The title of the book is *Jesus, The Bible and Homosexuality: Explore the Myths and Heal the Church*. Jack's story though is what I wanted to tell you about. It's instructive. He was a conservative Evangelical scholar who taught theology for years at Fuller Seminary, the premiere Evangelical seminary in the country. Jack and I grew up same part of western Pennsylvania. He grew up with same stereotypes and certainties as I did. He said his opposition to homosexuality was reflexive. It was part of his intellectual and spiritual equipment. But when he did a thorough scholarly analysis of the topic including digging deeply into every Scriptural reference, he changed his mind. It's a fine and thoughtful book. But what happened in its aftermath was illuminating and profoundly disappointing. Jack's old friends turned their backs on him. Fellow scholars with whom he taught and socialized for years stopped talking to him. I watch the same dynamic occur throughout the Presbyterian church – two sides retreating to enclaves of the like-minded cutting off contact with people of a different opinion. And I have concluded that in this respect our church instead of leading and modeling a different way was merely reflecting our society - a society which is today deeply and profoundly divided.

We've been divided before of course but I confess I've never seen anything like this. Americans, you will recall, argued passionately about Civil Rights and Vietnam and the war on poverty. This seems different. John Cass made light of it last week in a Tribune column. He pointed out that mixed marriage used to mean between a Methodist and an Episcopalian, or Greek and Irish – in my day obviously Catholic and Protestant. More recently black and white. Cass said the most difficult of all is a marriage between and Sox fan and a Cubs fan. But today this issue has become political. Democrats are now worried about someone in their family marrying a Republican; Republican families worrying about having to accommodate a Democrat. It's having very real ramifications for romance even. There are now Republican dating sights and Democrat dating sites. It is deep in our humanity apparently the eternal distrust and disdain of the other. Some anthropologists propose that human beings have trouble with self-identity without some other in contrast to whom I know who I am. That you cannot be you without someone you are definitively and definitely not. A reporter once asked Carl Sandburg what the ugliest word in the English language was. The great author and poet thought for a while and finally said, "Exclusive. Exclusive is the ugliest word in the English language."

As you know it's a major story and sad story within the larger story of human history. Members of one group or nation or religion or political party identify members of another group as

inferior, not very intelligent obviously, dirty, unclean, unfit, then begins to discriminate then isolate, finally eliminate. It is the dynamic for surly what is the ugliest phrase in the English language – ethnic cleansing, coined while Serbian leadership was attempting to cleanse the population of Bosnian Muslims.

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian who teaches at Yale, has written an important book *Exclusion And Embrace* in which he recalls the appalling racist ideology that prompted the terrible *terrible* violence of the Balkan War in which he happened to be a Croatian soldier. He remembers how in Sarajevo Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, Muslims and Jews had lived together for years peacefully and how incredible bloody violence had erupted between basically religious ethnic groups. After a lecture in Germany a distinguished scholar stood up and asked if he, Volf, could embrace the Chetnik, one of the Serbian fighters who had reined desolation and death on his native land, massacring whole populations, raping, burning down entire villages. Volf remembers, “I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace the Chetnik, the ultimate other, the evil other? It took me a while to answer,” he said. “Finally I said ‘no I cannot,’ but as a follower of Jesus Christ I think I should be able to, and I must.” Volf concludes, “It may not be too much to claim but the future of the world will depend on how well we deal with identity and difference.” The issue is urgent. The ghettos and battlefields throughout the world, in the living rooms, inner cities, testify indisputably to its importance. It is, I believe, the most pressing most urgent issue before our nation, our communities, our churches and our political parties, and each one of us. Can we turn off MSNBC and Fox News and listen to each other? Can we leave the safety of these alternate worlds we have created to confirm our prejudices and identity issues with alternate issues, or definitions now of truth and reality, and for a season simply listen to what the other is saying.

After the Cornelius / Peter incident, the Christian church gradually separated from its parent Judaism and went into all the world eventually opening its arms and its heart to the entire human race transcending every ancient barrier, and boundary and boarder – affirming all: Jew, gentile, black, white, brown, yellow, male, female, rich, poor, conservative, liberal, Republican, Democrat, gay and straight. Always praying and working for the kingdom, the one universal family of God. Will Willimon says, “this is the way it is sometimes in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship expecting surprise and new implications of the gospel, which cannot be explained on any other basis than our Lord has shown us something we could never see on our own.” That certainly has been my experience in this matter but also many other matters. “Faith,” Willimon says (and I

found this to be true in my own life and experience), “Faith is our often our breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God – to keep asking ourselves what is God doing? Where on earth is God going now? If the ugliest word in the language is *exclusive*, the most beautiful word must be ‘inclusive.’ Who after all could be excluded from the love of God?

In the final analysis, every one of us – Peter, Cornelius, my friend, you and I – come to God without our professional credentials, our advanced degrees, our accomplishments and successes without anything to commend us other than that we are God’s children – all of us – created, loved by God, accepted by God, surrounded and embraced by God’s amazing grace. We come, as the old hymn puts it: Just as I am and the promise is that God loving us, redeeming us, saving us will in fact convert us, recreate us, make us into the men and women God intended until every one – every last one of us – every outsider is an insider. Amen.