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“Who Is Good Enough?”

Acts 10:34-48

A Chicago bank that once asked for a letter of recommendation on a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and other of Boston’s first families. His recommendation was glowing and was given without hesitation.

Several days later, the Chicago bank sent back a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: “We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work.”

The scriptural reference for that same attitude is found right here in the book of Acts.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. (Acts 10:34-35).¹

In Acts Chapter 10, Peter is on his way to visit Cornelius. What do a devout Jewish Christian such as himself - and a Gentile have in common? As far as Peter is concerned, not much. Jews were not to eat with, visit, socialize, stay with, or do anything with Gentiles. Our Bible in the Hebrew Scriptures was very clear about what was clean and what was unclean. Peter would have been very careful in observing those laws.

Earlier in this chapter, we find Cornelius a God-fearing- but none-the-less a Gentile- a centurion based in the Roman enclave of Caesaria on the Mediterranean Sea. Cornelius receives a vision from God. An angel tells him to find Simon who is called Peter. So immediately he sends two or three men to Joppa to find Peter - following the Lord's command.

The next day at noon, Simon Peter goes up on the roof of the house he is staying at, and decides to pray while his meal is being prepared. God gives a hungry Peter a vision, as well. While Peter is in a trance, he sees something like a large sheet being lowered down before him by all four of its corners. It contains all kinds of animals, many that an observant Jew would have nothing to do with. The voice in the vision says, "Go ahead Peter, kill and eat." His response is so quick - he isn't aware that he is arguing with God, and says, "No way, Lord, I will not and have not eaten of food that is impure and unclean." The voice responds by saying, "Do not consider unclean what God has made clean." Three times this happens before the vision ends.

Peter is wondering what all this means when Cornelius' men arrive at the door, looking for him. The men explain to Peter who Cornelius is, about his vision, and their wishes for Peter to accompany them back to Caesarea. The men stay the night with Peter and then leave the next morning to see Cornelius. Can you imagine what Peter is thinking on the way? Probably something like, "What wild and crazy thing is the Lord up to in all this?"

When Peter arrives at Cornelius' house he begins to understand more about how God is at work. Peter tells all those who have gathered about the Good News of God's love as Peter has discovered in Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. Then, in the later part of this morning's readings, when Peter isn't even finished speaking, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentile listeners and

has them speaking in tongues, just like it did for the disciples on Pentecost. Right off then, Peter has Cornelius and his household baptized in the name of Jesus.

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Sitting here 20 centuries later, it is hard for us to grasp the magnitude of the transformation here. If we look about for a comparison in our day, we might think back to one of the most outspoken conservative Christians of our day, the late Jerry Falwell who died 7 months ago. Imagine with me what it would be like if Jerry Falwell had had a vision in which he learned:

- that not only religious conservatives, but also those middle of the road Methodists and Lutherans, and EVEN those religious liberals, are also children of God, and should be welcomed into full membership in God's church.
- It would be as if Jerry Falwell suddenly understood that both men **and women** are to serve in equal positions of responsibility in the service of God's church.
- It would be as if Jerry Falwell suddenly understood- because of some life-changing revelation from God- that during the altar call of his Sunday service at Thomas Road Baptist Church, a committed, monogamous homosexual couple was to be welcomed into the membership of God's church.... with no more judgment than attends a a committed, monogamous heterosexual couple.

Impossible, you may say. Jerry Falwell could never change THAT much.

But this is just same magnitude of change that Peter was undergoing in this morning's passage! Gentiles such as Cornelius were not even allowed to be a part of the earliest Christian church. So Peter's willingness

to trust his God-given vision over against all the powerful, ongoing traditions in which he was trained, his willingness to stand for RADICAL INCLUSION in God's church, was the opening that allowed the likes of you and me in.

And we are all Gentiles; well, at least you are! I'm half Jewish by blood. My father's side of our family is thoroughly Jewish as far back as any genealogy can tell us.

Some of you have met my father when he visited here last year. As you get to know my father, you quickly recognize in him an integrity, a humility, and a dutiful, servant spirit that any Christian should be pleased to attain. But Dad has not accepted Jesus Christ as his savior. As my sisters and I were growing up, he recited with us in his small, Reform Jewish congregation in central Florida the ancient Shema, that has always bound the Jewish people together: *Shema Ys'roel, Adonai, Elohenu, Adonai Echad*. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." There's no room in this ancient call, for a Jesus who is also somehow understood as God, too.

My Dad turned 80 yrs. old six weeks after Falwell died in 2007, and Dad's Alzheimer's disease is now so advanced that he can't utter a complete sentence – other than the important one "I love you" which he says often - or understand much of anything said to him. But Dad even in his prime, Dad was no philosopher, no great student of any religion, including his own. Still, he was always a very faithful and very good man.

When I was a teenager and first came to Christ myself, my first impulse was to insist that Dad claim Christ as his savior as I had. My evangelistic approach to Dad was mercilessly blunt. I wanted Dad to give up his Judaism, to embrace Gentile Christianity, just like Peter's Jewish Christian church wanted Gentiles to give up their ways to become just like

Peter, a circumcised, kosher food eating, sabbath evening worshipping, Mosaic law honoring Jewish Christian. I wanted Dad to see things my way, the right way, of course, and I very nearly obliterated our relationship as father and son in the process. Thanks be to God.... and also to Dad's forgiving spirit, we didn't stay forever at odds.

As best I can tell, over the course of the years, Dad has hardly changed his religious views at all. But in the 35 years since, I've mellowed quite a bit. And now I have come to the point of no longer having any trouble understanding how my Jewish father, my Christian mother, all of us, and every category of human beings you can imagine, can ALL look forward to a day of reunion in God's heaven. Focusing on God's amazing grace, that can save everyone, not limiting our understanding of God's mercy to our mere human horizons, to mere human forgiveness, but trusting God to be more astoundingly INCLUSIVE than we could ever be... and - I might add - admitting that we might not yet have the complete picture of a God's eye view of the world... we can conceive of a wideness in God's mercy, much wider than the sea. But in order to achieve that understanding, I've had to give up the simple Jerry Falwell view that once so easily separated the sheep from the goats.

Others in my own family still haven't resolved that. Several of my family members who are very dedicated Christians are still wrestling with scripture passages and their congregations' teachings that say that only those who trust in their particular version of Jesus will finally be acceptable to God. We were gathered around the family dinning room table in FL on Tue. Night rehashing this issue once again. They believe – as do a sizeable number of Christians still today – perhaps many of you- that everyone else

who approaches God in a different way— will be consigned to a hell at the end of this earthly life... even good, faithful Jews like our Dad.

So the question of who is good enough for God's community of the faithful is not some academic question of hypothetical interest. My father stands as a personal challenge in our family to any tendency to get overly tribal in our understanding of who is good enough to be a part of God's community.

In Peter's day, after Jesus' death and resurrection, as the infant church began to seek its way in the world, those who were following Jesus' way were all Jews. No one was Christian unless they were first Jews. The whole argument that Peter answers in Acts, Chapters 11 and 15, Peter is accounting to his Religious Right for his actions, "What the heck," they'd say," was Peter doing with Gentiles?" He retells the story of Cornelius' conversion saying, "Who am I to oppose God?" and that obviously it was God's handiwork not merely some human concoction.

Peter was still preaching his sermon to Cornelius when the Holy Spirit came upon them. They spoke in ecstatic babble, meaningless sounds that rolled out like a river of praise to God. For Peter it was a clear sign of the Spirit's presence... and coupled with Peter's vision of the food declared clean to eat, Peter found himself in the midst of a TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT when the doors to the Beloved Community of the faithful were being opened wider than Peter ever dreamed possible!

But looking back now at the whole broad, story of the Bible.... Reflecting on this same ever expanding community of welcome....I suppose that we shouldn't be so surprised when some new Pentecost comes; when some new vision breaks through the old limits we thought God ordained....

Limits that for so long kept dark-skinned children of God as slaves & then as second-class even within the church of Jesus;

Limits that for so long kept female children of God in subservient roles, locked out of leadership.

I suppose we shouldn't be so surprised to find God ready and willing to welcome into the community of faith:

Liberal and conservative;

Rich and poor;

Gay and straight;

The worldly powerful & those who sleep homeless at our gates,

All are welcome... all invited to God's table, all – I am firmly convinced- bound for heaven together.

But the Spirit of the Living God is still not done with us yet in this beloved community, not until everyone..... everyone is welcomed into the community.... With no preconditions that they change their skin color; their politics; their financial situation; their sexual orientation; their cultural or moral practices as Peter learns in today's passage...even their religion.... No preconditions, just as we understand that God has no preconditions. All are welcome.

Who is – on our own merit- good enough? That's easy. None of us is good enough. That is the meaning of Paul's words in Romans Chapter 3: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"

But just as there is no distinction in our shortcoming, the Good News that we proclaim is that there is also no distinction in our welcome. As Peter puts it:

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."

Acceptable, rightwised, saved.

Everyone. Halleluia. Amen.
