
We are all connected
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 10:1-29, 44-48

We hear a lot these days about how we should tolerate people who are different from us. Well, just for the record, I strongly disagree with that sentiment. I will tell you boldly and without qualifiers that we should stop tolerating people who are different. If that surprises you, please give me a moment to let me unpack that statement, because what I mean is not what Donald Trump means when he doesn't tolerate something - not at all. I have something much better in mind.

[slide : prism]

But first, we all know what this is, right? It's a prism. And what does a prism do? If you went to school in Canada you probably learned that a prism breaks down white light into its component colours, which you can see in this image if you imagine the light is going from left to right through the prism. Well, that's true of course. But that's only half of the story. Because a prism does something else too. It also takes coloured light - at the appropriate angles - and combines them into white light, which you can see in the same image if you imagine the light is going from right to left through the prism.

But I have to tell you a secret. There is no such thing as white light - except in your mind. Remember that light is a wave of photons, and different wavelengths of photons give us different colours.

[slide: EM spectrum]

Here's the full spectrum of visible light. The colours each have a corresponding wavelength, as you see. For example, green is not a single frequency, but is a band extending from about 490 nm to 560 nm. Notice in this image that we have the entire visible spectrum. But where is white? There is no white in the visible spectrum because there is no wavelength that corresponds to white photons. White light does not exist.

[slide: prism]

We see what we call white light when the different colours come together, like in this

image, and our brains interpret that as white. But there are no photons of light that are actually white.

The effect of white light is created by photons of many different colours coming together. And that's just how a healthy community is created too. Different people with different backgrounds come together, retain their individuality, and yet also create something new - community. In an inclusive community, individuals are celebrated for who they are, not just their ability to "fit in". Differences are not tolerated, they are sought out and celebrated!

With light, if any one colour is missing from the spectrum, we do not get white light. And in our community, we need everybody right here to make this community what it needs to be. If anyone is excluded, we are not the same community. Tolerating people is like filtering out certain colours from the visible spectrum. We need to stop tolerating people and start embracing everyone in our community for the gift that they are.

That's why I said earlier - we should stop tolerating people. Because tolerating people is actually not very positive. You can easily tolerate a person by just ignoring them, but then you miss out on the gift of that person. Our differences should be embraced, lifted up, incorporated, celebrated. Not just tolerated. If the best you can do with another person is to tolerate them - go back and try a bit harder!

Which brings us to our reading from Acts today, which I will argue is the most important chapter in the entire Bible for the church. Wow - did I really say that? Did I just declare Acts 10 to be the most important chapter in the Bible for the church? Yes, because without the story in Acts 10, there would not be a Christian Church today. I agree, on the surface it's a strange reading. Some person - Peter - who we don't know much about has a dream about a bedsheet full of animals descending from the heavens and he has to decide whether or not to eat the animals. Really? The story sounds completely irrelevant, if not completely insane. Which is the point actually. But I'm getting ahead of myself. And - as often happens around here - we need just a little bit of history.

In 2 weeks, we will celebrate pentecost - traditionally taken to be the birth of the Christian church. And today's reading outlines an important part of that story. It is hard to pin down the exact beginnings of Christianity. We could start with Jesus as a disciple of

John the baptizer. Or we could start with Jesus's public ministry and his disciples. But no matter where we imagine the movement started, "The Jesus Movement", sometimes referred to as "The Way", started as a sect within Judaism - which is itself small. Their leader - Jesus - and all of the disciples were Jewish, and would never have heard the word "Christian" during their lifetime.

So how did a Jewish sect become a non-Jewish religion? Well, that's a long story, but one of the early steps in that story was the acceptance of non-Jewish people as followers of Jesus. And most of the book of Acts is about the interplay between Jewish followers of Jesus and non-Jewish followers of Jesus which happened as the Jesus movement expanded both geographically and theologically. And Acts 10 was a decisive point in that story.

And we need to imagine that this transition was not simple or straight-forward. Because the transition had to do with acceptance of others. The transition had to do with who was an insider and who was an outsider. The transition therefore affected identity. And changes to identity are always struggles. In a few weeks we will see that there are many other cultural and religious inputs that went into making up the original Christian religion, including Roman, Greek, and Egyptian influences. Including pagan groups and sun worshippers. Including snake handlers and lots of exotic groups. As the followers of Jesus expanded geographically, they also expanded culturally, philosophically, ritually, and theologically. Christianity did not simply grow out of Judaism, it was an inclusive project of broad dimensions from the earliest days. But we will get to that some other time.

Today's story is simple by comparison. In this story, the only real issue being dealt with is whether or not non-Jewish people could be accepted as followers of Jesus.

Peter, one of the the leaders at the time, clearly felt that only Jewish people could be part of the Jesus movement. But all that changed when Peter had his dream and met Cornelius. To the early Jesus movement, Cornelius was a problem. Cornelius was a devout person who prayed to God, and who helped people in need. He wanted to follow Jesus. But - he was not Jewish. How was that going to work?

The Jesus movement had to make an important decision. Did they want to

maintain their cultural identity? Or did they want to maintain their commitment to the principle of inclusivity that Jesus lived for and taught? Did the group want to maintain their cultural biases, or did they want to live a more inclusive life. In short, the early Jesus movement had to choose between accepting Cornelius, or giving up on Jesus.

And that's why I argue this is the most important chapter in the Bible for the Christian Church. Because if Peter had failed to get the point of the dream, the Jesus club would have remained a small sect within a small religion. It would never have embraced all people as potential members of the Jesus club. Because Christian principles are fundamentally inclusive. Now before you correct me, yes I am aware that we have not always lived out that vision very well. The Christian Church has made many disastrous trips into racist and exclusivist behaviour, including the Crusades against Muslims, centuries of support for slavery, and the conquest of North America at the expense of indigenous people, among other examples we could name. Those were mistakes - deviations from Christian aspirations - not the way the Christian Church should have behaved. The fundamental basis of Christianity from Acts 10 is acceptance that all people are children of God. Period. What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

So who might we identify with in this story? Perhaps, we would identify with Peter. Perhaps we would be part of the established group - the status quo - the people who have been around for awhile. And we see that things are changing. We see that we no longer define the cultural norms in our society. Perhaps we really sympathize with Peter. We want things to stay as they are. We want things to stay comfortable for us. Well that's great - but as you may have noticed, we are all surrounded by people who are different from us and who come with many gifts. I'm sure that we - open-minded people that we are - are all inclusive people, right?

Perhaps. But there are 2 types of inclusive behaviour: active and passive.

Passive inclusion is where we say that we accept everyone, but we do it by the simple expedient of not really paying much attention to "those people" anyway. We put up with people who are different, and we don't attack them, which is good. But at the same time, we don't really engage with them. We tolerate them but do not include them as equals. We don't see them as a gift from God. That's passive inclusion.

So what does active inclusion look like? Active inclusion is the reality where we do not tolerate people, rather, we engage with them, interact with them, and fully expect to learn from them as they learn from us too. There is no need to tolerate a person if you feel you are on an equal footing with them. If you are on an equal footing, that's not tolerating a person, that's friendship. There is only the desire to learn from the other person with the hope that you yourself will grow from the experience. Active inclusion is a state where we can accept other people for who they are, without feeling the compulsion either to imitate them or to correct them. Other people get to be themselves. And we get to be ourselves. Active inclusion is healthy! Active inclusion is realizing that we are incomplete without the other, and that the other person actually might hold a piece of the puzzle of life for us. Active inclusion is realizing that all colours are required in order to make white light, and that all of us are required to make a healthy community.

We all know that this sounds great in principle, and even better in a sermon. But humans have always struggled to live out the vision of inclusion. I regret to inform you that struggle exists in the Christian Church, but the struggle goes far beyond the church too because it is fundamental to human nature.

It's interesting that we should get this teaching today, on May 17. Because May 17 is widely recognized as the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, which is a "Worldwide celebration of Sexual and Gender Diversities".¹ The struggle against homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia is very old of course. But 30 years ago today, one milestone in that struggle was reached. Because on May 17, 1990, the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from its official list of diseases. Homosexuality has often been seen as a disease that can perhaps be fixed. But 30 years ago it was officially declared that homosexuality is not a disease at all.

Gender and sexuality is one aspect of humanity that continues to be seen as a barrier to separate people into "us" and "them", that can defy inclusion and therefore full community. And how do we respond to sexuality and gender here? At SHUC? In Brantford? Are we inclusive? And if we are inclusive, do we live out passive inclusion, or active inclusion?

¹ <https://may17.org>

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May 17 is a good day to lift up gender and sexuality, but the broader question would be, what barriers exist in our own minds that we use to separate “us” and “them”, and are those healthy barriers? 2000 years ago, The Jesus club struggled to accept non-Jewish people. Is there anyone in our own community that we struggle to accept? Or do we actually live and breathe the idea that we are all connected. I’d love to hear from you all over coffee time, or call me up sometime. I honestly want to know what this community thinks.

By the way, did anyone recognize this image in Snippets this week? It’s a visualization of one way that we are connected. It shows aircraft routes in Europe. The blob in the upper left is England. The bright spot in the upper right is Berlin. The lines extending to the left show connections with North America. I think we are all connected, but that still invites the question - what we do with those connections?

All people are children of God. Period. What God has made clean, you must not call profane. We are all connected.

Amen.