
Building the kin-dom of God
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 10

Acts chapter 10 is perhaps the most important chapter in the Bible for the Christian Church. I'm sure that surprises some of you. In fact, I can hear your objections from here. Surely - you say - the most important texts for Christianity are about the resurrection of Jesus, right. Well, perhaps. But perhaps not. And to be honest it does depend a bit on how we read these stories. Because on the surface, Acts 10 is a bit nuts. [image: Peter and the animals]

Some guy - Peter - who we do not know very much about has a dream about a bedsheet full of animals descending from the heavens. And Peter has to decide whether or not to eat the animals. Really? When we read the story literally, the story just sounds like proof that psychedelic drugs have been around for a long time. On the surface, the story makes no sense. Which is the point of the story actually. But I'm getting ahead of myself. And - as often happens around here - we need just a little bit of history. [image: Jesus was a Palestinian jew]

The early Jesus movement was entirely Jewish. Jesus and his friends were Jewish. The first people who joined the Jesus club - a club often simply called "The Way" - were all Jewish. And that club evolved over time into what we now call the Christian Church. There were many steps over more than one hundred years that enabled that development. Some of those steps involved geographic expansion. Some of those steps involved theological expansion. But one critical step - depicted in Acts 10 - is the decision to allow the Jesus movement to move beyond the bounds of Judaism.

To make sense of how difficult that transition was, we have to remember that 2000 years ago Jewish people felt that they were God's chosen people. They felt that non-Jewish people were less valuable in the sight of God. Non-Jewish people were seen as inferior. They were unclean. It was only natural that members of a Jewish sect were not automatically keen to embrace non-Jewish members. Indeed their tradition required them

to have minimal contact with non-Jewish people. Romans would talk with anyone. But 2000 years ago, Jewish people wanted to remain separate and aloof.

And then we have Cornelius, a non-Jewish person who experienced the presence of God. And because of that experience, Cornelius was driven to want an audience with Peter. In normal day-to-day life, Peter would not have spoken with Cornelius because Cornelius was not Jewish. But then Peter has his dream.

[image: animals]

And his dream includes a bedsheet full of animals that Jewish tradition declared to be unclean (and therefore not fit to be eaten). God tells Peter to eat. And Peter decides to remind God of what is in the Jewish Bible and points out to God that the animals are all unclean. And God simply declares that they are clean. And furthermore, that if God declares them clean, they are clean. God puts religious tradition where it belongs, which is behind God. In the dream, God declares that love is more important than racial biases.

[image: inclusion]

The dream tells Peter that all animals are clean. Reality tells Peter that all people are “clean”. There are no “chosen people”. God does not pick favourites. Since God made all people, we are all children of God and we should all relate to each other as equals. And perhaps we do not appreciate how radical that message was 2000 years ago. Regrettably, that message is still radical today. Yes, in many ways we have moved a long way forward in terms of accepting people who are different from us. But in Canadian society - and even in the church - we still have overt racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. We do not have this all figured out either. So perhaps we understand this story better than we want to admit that we do.

In any case, I will argue that Acts 10 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 sect within Judaism, and a very small one at that. It would never have embraced all people as potential members of the Jesus club. The Christian Church would never had gotten started. And more importantly, the inclusion of all people is one of the defining features of Christianity. Now before you correct me, yes I am aware that the Christian Church has not always lived out that vision. The Christian

Church has made many trips into racist, sexist, and exclusivist behaviour. Including the Crusades against Muslims. Including centuries of support for slavery. Including the conquest of North America at the expense of indigenous people. Including allowing small-minded thinking to persist today. Those were mistakes. Deviations from Christian principles. Not the way the Church should have acted. One fundamental basis of Christianity is acceptance that all people are children of God. Period. What God has called clean, we must not call unclean.

[image: past vs future]

I hope I have at least partially convinced you that Acts 10 was important for the formation of the Christian Church. But I think Acts 10 is also important for the future of the church. Consider this. In the story as written, it was the Jewish community that was mainstream and was wondering how - or if - to embrace outsiders. But today, we the Christian Church are the mainstream and we are invited to wonder how - or if - to embrace outsiders.

Sometimes when we read Acts 10, we place ourselves amongst the outsiders. I mean, we are not Jewish. So in Acts 10, we see ourselves as the ones trying to break into the Jesus club. But today we are the Jesus club. And so I invite us to hear the story in Acts 10 from the other side. We need to re-read Acts 10 and to place ourselves within the dominant community in the story. Because we ourselves are now the ones being challenged with how to deal with outsiders who want to join with us in our mission. People who are not like us. People who do not want to join us. People who want to join our mission, not our institution.

[image: all children of god]

In Canada, Christianity has certainly declined in power since the 1950s. But within these walls, we still have the power to simply ignore outsiders. If we want to. We can choose to decide that we are God's special little people and other people are just ... less. If we want to. Or we can embrace the vision that all people are children of God. We can accept the call to put legs to the idea that what God has called clean, we must not call unclean. And then we can take that vision onto our streets.

Are you confused? Is Rev. Paul really saying that we should open our doors to

non-Christians. Doesn't he know that this is a church. What is he talking about now. Good question. I'm talking about how - or if - we want to engage with our own community here in Brantford.

[image: nuns]

I'm sure we've all heard of this groups called "nones". No, not that kind of nun.

[image: nones]

These are people who - when given a census and asked about their religious affiliation - tick off the box "none". There are so many people who tick off the box "none" that the group has a name. They are the "nones". About 1/3 of Canadians are nones. And if we only look at younger adults, that number is closer to 1/2. If we want to reach out beyond our own walls, one way to reach out is to target the nones.

[image: nones on the rise]

What do we want to do with these nones? Do we want to just sit back and declare that they "should" come to church? Do we want to sit smugly and imagine that of course our style of worship should be a pleasant experience for them? Do we want to ignore them completely? Or do we want to put on programs in this church that would actually interest them? I know for a fact that for many of us here - including me - those "nones" include our own children. So I hope we do not want to ignore them.

I want to read from a Huffington Post article from almost 10 years ago written by Gary Laderman, "[T]he rise of the "nones" surely suggests it is the end of religion as we know it. Forget churches; forget priests and pastors; forget the Bible; forget organized religion generally. What is sacred are no longer conventional objects like a cross, a singular religious identity like being a Methodist, nor activities like going to church or prayer. Instead, the religious worlds in the contemporary and future United States are robust and capacious, providing an abundance of spiritual possibilities found in unexpected places like drum circles and meditation exercises, sports events and other expressions from popular culture. It is a brave new world for religious Americans who are increasingly unhinged from traditional authorities and institutions."¹

The question is not really, "who are these nones". We know who they are. The

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-rise-of-religious-non_b_2913000

question is are we open to accepting them in our midst without forcing them to be like us? That is exactly the struggle that was going on in Acts 10.

I want to highlight how these nones really are like us in so many ways. As I said, they are like our own children because most of our children are nones.

[image: final battlefield star trek]

Let me share a personal story with you. In 1969 Star Trek had an episode called “Let that be your last battlefield”. In the episode, the Enterprise encounters two individuals who are both half-white and half-black. One of them considers himself a freedom-fighter. The other one calls him a terrorist. These two people hate each other. One of them has been chasing the other with the intention of bringing him back to their home planet to face charges of terrorism. Their chase has gone on for 50,000 years. Their chase led them to the Enterprise. The entire crew found it very hard to understand the hatred between the two people. They were both from the same planet. They were both half-white and half-black. Finally, near the very end of the episode we discover that the hatred is racial. Because one of them is white on the left side and the other is white on the right side. And for that reason, they are sworn enemies. In the end, the Enterprise is forced to take both of them back to their home planet. Only to discover that the entire population of their home planet killed each other long ago.

[image: star trek tos cast]

Star Trek often had episodes with a great deal of social commentary. Even the make-up of the cast was very radical at the time. Yes, the captain is the most normal-looking white male. And in stereotypical fashion, the engineer is Scottish. But the main crew included two women, one of whom was black. The crew included a Russian, an Asian, and an Alien. When Star Trek was first aired in 1966 that was radical.

When I was a teenager and learning about the world, I remember watching Star Trek. And I remember that particular episode - as a rerun - I did not see it in 1969. And the same week that I saw that episode I remember going to church and learning something about how even though God loves everyone, obviously Christians are right and everyone else - regrettably - will not be enjoying their afterlife.

[image: bigotry is bigotry]

In the same week of my life, Star Trek told me that we are all children of God. And my own church told me that Christians were God's special little people.

I remember being baffled that the church - an institution that should preach love and justice - was preaching exclusivism. Meanwhile a low-budget TV show was teaching me better morals than I was learning in my own church. And yes, I did think like this when I was a teenager.

[image: the only thing worse]

You know what they say, The only thing worse than a child who does not pay attention is one who does. Right Dakota?

I share this story because I feel that we should not blame these nones for finding spiritual value outside the church. We should blame ourselves for not giving the nones good reasons to come into the church. We should consider how the joy and life that we ourselves find in the church can be expressed in new ways that allow other people to participate, including nones.

One issue - according to the nones that I speak with - is that they would perhaps like to do things in / at / or with the church. But their perception is that we do not DO very much. They are - in general - not interesting in sitting on committees. But they would like to DO things. They are open to relationship with other people. And please do not think that this is a new idea. This idea pre-dates covid. It predates colour television. It pre-dates hockey practice on Sundays. It pre-dates all the other excuses we like to give for why young people do not come to church. It is an idea from 800 years ago when St Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. And when absolutely necessary, use words". The Gospel has always been preached most effectively with action. We need to be do-ers of the word. And if we DO the word, maybe we can work together with the nones.

Here at Sydenhan-Heritage United Church, our slogan is ... wait ... what is our slogan?

[image: talking about the kin-dom of God]

Talking about the kin-dom of God. Wait, that doesn't sound right.

[image: complaining about all the reasons it is hard to find the kin-dom of God]

Complaining about all the reasons it is hard to find the kin-dom of God. No, that doesn't sound quite right either.

[image: Building the kin-dom of God]

Of course. It's "Building the kin-dom of God". That's a great slogan. But building is an active verb. Let's get to it! Let's DO it. Perhaps the nones will DO along with us.

Amen.