
Building the kin-dom of God
Chapel in the Park 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. And you might be right. But I said the most important chapter for the church, not for Christianity as a whole. 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 Jews. The first people who joined the Jesus club - a club often simply called "The Way" - were all Jews. 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.

[image: cornelius]

And then we have Cornelius, a non-Jewish person who experienced the presence of Christ. 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 a Jew. 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). In the dream, 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 in the dream 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 bigotry.

[image: inclusion]

The dream tells Peter that all animals are clean. The point of the dream was not about animals. It was about people. What Peter needed to learn was that all people are “clean”. There are no “chosen people”. God does not pick favourites. God is not racist. 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 well aware that the Christian Church has not always lived out that vision very well. 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 witch hunts. Including the Spanish Inquisition. Including many antisemitic activities. Including the conquest of North America at the expense of indigenous people. Including pushing Christian Nationalism as a thinly cloaked form of bigotry. Including allowing small-minded thinking to persist today. Those were and are 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 convinced at least some of 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 in the mainstream and was wondering how - or if - to embrace outsiders. But today, we the Christian Church are in the mainstream and we are invited to wonder how - or if - to embrace outsiders.

Sometimes when we read Acts 10, we place ourself 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 we perhaps have historically rejected. People who want to join our mission, not necessarily 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.

Wait a minute? 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 wider community. I'm talking about how we build the kin-dom of God today.

Do you know what nones are?

[image: nuns]

No, not that kind of nun. I mean this kind of none.

[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 reach out to 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? 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 and other family members.

I want to read from a Huffington Post article from 12 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. These nones really are like us in so many ways. As I said, they are like our own children because many of our children and grandchildren are nones themselves. The question is are we open to accepting them in our midst without forcing them to be like us? That was exactly the struggle that was going on in Acts 10.

[image: star trek final battlefield]

I want to share a personal story with you. Here’s the context. In 1969 Star Trek had an episode called “Let this 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.

[image: star trek black and white]

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. The episode was about the stupidity of racism.

[image: star trek tos cast]

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

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. And also 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 will of course go straight to hell.

[image: bigotry]

In the same week of my life, Star Trek told me that racism was stupid. And my own church told me that God is racist.

I remember being baffled that the church - an institution that should preach love and justice for all people - was preaching exclusivism. Meanwhile a low-budget TV show was teaching me better morals than I was seeing 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 teenager who does not pay attention is one who does.

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 always 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 others ways that allow other people to participate, including nones.

[image: church in action]

One issue - according to 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. Nones are - in general - not interesting in sitting on committees. But they would like to DO things.

This is not a new idea. This idea pre-dates the pandemic. It pre-dates hockey practice on Sundays. It predates colour television. It pre-dates all the excuses we like to give for why young people do not come to church. The idea was expressed very clearly 800 years ago when St Francis of Assisi said,

[image: preach the gospel]

“Preach the Gospel at all times. And when absolutely necessary, use words”. The Gospel has always been preached most effectively with action, not words. We need to be do-ers of the word. And if we DO the word, maybe we can work together with the nones.

[image: mother's day]

To close, I want to tie this all in with Mother's Day. Which in the church has traditionally been a time to celebrate the love we find in our families, with a special nod to our mothers. Because this is really what we have been talking about today. Except expanded to include a broader vision of “family”. So broad that we sometimes call it the kingdom of God.

[image: kin-dom]

And to play with that phrase just a little bit, I encourage us to think of the kin-dom of God. In the sense that all people are children of God and therefore we are all kin to each other.

What God has called clean, we must not call unclean. We are all children of God. Let's live into that.

Happy Mother's Day!

Amen.