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The Full Spectrum  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
May 17, 2026  
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 does not tolerate something - not at all. I have something very different in mind.

[image: prism]

And as a lead in to that conversation ... we all know what this is, right? It's a prism. And what does a prism do? Well, in school we all 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 is true of course.

But I feel the need to tell you two things you may not have learned in school. The first is quite simple. It's just that a prism does something else. A prism 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. Prisms actually work in both directions.

The second thing you may not have learned in school ... is that white light does not actually exist - except in your mind. Yes, you heard me correctly. White light does not exist. Remember that light is a wave of photons, and different wavelengths of photons give us different colours.

[image: 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 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

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no wavelength that corresponds to white. We have violet, purple, blue, green, yellow, orange, red. There is no white. White light does not exist. However, it does exist in our minds. Our eyes combine the full spectrum of colours and create a sensation in our brain of what we call “white light”. But white light does not exist.

[image: newton disc]

Actually, we can prove that right here and now. This is called a “Newton Disc”. It is made up of the principal colours in the spectrum. If we spin it really fast, the colours will all merge into what looks like white. And as you can tell - there is no white on the Newton Disc.

I did not have an electric motor, so I left the job to someone with more time on their hands.

[image: newton disc at rest]

[image: newton disc rotating fast]

[image: prism]

When photons of all different colours come together, they collectively create white light. And that is just like how community is created. Different people with different backgrounds, ideas, and opinions come together, retain their individuality, and yet also create something new - community.

With light, if any one colour is missing from the spectrum, we do not get white light. We need the full spectrum if we want to create white light. And in our community, we need everybody right here to make this community what it is. If anyone is excluded, we become a different community. We become less. As a community, we also need the full spectrum - not of light, but of people.

That’s why I said earlier - we should stop tolerating people. Because tolerating people is actually not very inclusive. 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! Or - for bonus points - figure out why you are so triggered by the gift of that person. When someone triggers us it is a great opportunity for us to ask what that says about us.

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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! There is no need to tolerate someone who you think of as an equal because that is called friendship. 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.

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 out loud? Did I just declare Acts 10 to be the most important chapter in the Bible for the church? Yes, because without the story described in Acts 10, there would not be a Christian Church today.

On the surface it’s a very strange reading. Some person - Peter - who we do not 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. Peter decides to reject certain animals because they are traditionally called unclean. But God declares the animals to be clean. All them. Meaning that none of the animals are unclean. All of the animals are clean.

The story sounds completely irrelevant, if not completely insane. Until we remember what was happening at the time that this story was written. We need a bit of history here.

Next week will be 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 with 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. Their leader - Jesus - and all of the disciples were Jewish, and would never have heard the word “Christian” during their lifetimes.

So how did a Jewish sect become a non-Jewish religion? Well, that’s a long story, but one of the steps in that story was the acceptance of non-Jewish people as followers of

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Jesus. And most of the book of Acts is about the interplay between Jewish followers of Jesus and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. This came to a head as the Jesus movement expanded both geographically and theologically. And Acts 10 was a decisive point in that story. The story is not about eating animals. The story is about who is clean and who is not clean. Jewish tradition declared that non-Jews were unclean. But in the dream God declared that everyone is clean. In other words, the Jesus's club was free to welcome everyone into their midst. What God has called clean, we must not call unclean.

Peter, one of the the leaders at the time, felt that only Jewish people could be part of the Jesus movement. But then 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. He helped people in need. He wanted to follow Jesus. But - Cornelius was not Jewish. How was that going to work?

The Jesus movement had to make an important decision. Did they want to maintain their narrow cultural identity? Or did they want to maintain their commitment to the principle of inclusivity that Jesus lived out 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 they chose to accept Cornelius.

And that's why I argue 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 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 well 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. Including centuries of support for slavery. Including the conquest of North America at the expense of indigenous people. Including the current rise of Christian Nationalism on our own streets. And I could name other examples. Those were mistakes - deviations from Christian aspirations - not the way the Christian Church should behave. The fundamental basis of

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Christianity from Acts 10 is the principle that all people are children of God. Period.

What God has called clean, we must not call unclean.

So who do we identify with in this story? I suspect most of us identify with Peter. Peter represents the established group. Peter represents the status quo. Perhaps, like Peter, we want to cling to our past. Perhaps, like Peter, we do not appreciate the changing social demographics all around us. Perhaps, like Peter, we feel like we are being pushed into the margins of our own society. Because - as you may have noticed - we are surrounded by people who are different from us. Perhaps we struggle to embrace people who - historically - we have called unclean. But God has called them clean.

But wait - I hear you say - we are inclusive people. Look around! This congregation is not a monoculture. And I agree. And I celebrate that with you. In many ways we are inclusive people. But I would invite all of us - including me - to pay attention in the coming week. And to look for people who trigger us. Because knowing who triggers us can be a great clue as to where we struggle with inclusion. And if you do see someone who triggers you, I invite you to say to yourself, “what God has called clean, we must not call unclean.” And then look at the person again with fresh eyes.

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. Humans do seem to be quite tribal in nature. But we can overcome our tribal biases by saying to ourselves, “what God has called clean, we must not call unclean.”

[image: IDAHOBT]

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”<sup>1</sup>. The struggle against homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia is very old of course. But 36 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. Prior to that time, homosexuality was classified as a disease that could be fixed. But 36 years ago it was officially declared that homosexuality is not a disease.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://may17.org>

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Gender and sexuality are two aspects of humanity that continue to be seen as barriers used to separate people into “us” and “them”. That can defy inclusion and therefore prevent us from being the community that we could be.

I have seen that lack of inclusion played out in the United Church of Canada. Let me tell you about a friend. I will call her Susan. Susan and I attended seminary @ Emmanuel College at the same time. We had many classes together. We both learned a lot from each other. She was an amazing person. Susan was also the first trans woman to be ordained by a mainline church anywhere in the world.

We often think of the United Church as a fairly open-minded, progressive community of faith. But Susan did not have an easy go of it. Her internship placement was - unsurprisingly - selected with great care. But in spite of that, her internship included struggles dealing with people who projected their own hatred onto her.

Susan had a wonderful ministry of presence. In her case, just showing up was a ministry in itself. And she was there because of her deep love for the church, and for Jesus. She was an inspiration. Many people missed seeing the true gift of Susan because they could not see past her identity as a trans woman. But in many ways, that was one of the least interesting things about Susan.

Susan discovered church when she was middle-aged. She sort of accidentally walked into Trinity-St. Paul’s United Church, on Bloor Street. And she fell in love with the community. Susan said all the time to anyone who would listen, she “came for the community and stayed for the Jesus”. She was a Jesus addict.

For me, the most interesting thing about Susan had nothing to do with her gender or her sexuality. I was just stunned that anyone would decide to enter professional ministry in the United Church of Canada - having only experienced one congregation. I frequently reminded Susan that Trinity St. Paul’s is not a typical United Church congregation. And I tried to help her understand the breadth of congregational realities she might encounter during her professional ministry.

I mean, consider me. Before I entered seminary I had been an active member of many different congregations. I have chaired every church committee there is - except the UCW. I had seen congregational dynamics in a variety of congregational settings. I had a

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rough idea what I was getting myself into when I entered seminary. But for Susan to take on ministry leadership based only on her experiences at TSP was brave, bold, and daring.

Sadly, many people could only see Susan as what she represented to them as a trans woman. She was that. But she was a massive Jesus-lover too. She was - and still is - a gift to our church. Susan was a gift - not just because she was a trans woman, but simply because she was Susan.

[image: prism]

Susan's story is not ancient history. It happened in my own lifetime, in my own seminary class, in our own United Church. And it is still happening. Which is why May 17 matters.

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 people into “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 into the idea that we are all children of God.

White light does not exist as a single thing. It only exists when every colour shows up together. Community is the same. We only become what God intended when the full spectrum is present. Every wavelength. Every colour. Every person.

What God has called clean, we must not call unclean.

*Amen.*