

Pastor's Message – 5/5/24
Acts 10:44-48
1 John 5:1-6

This past winter, I had placed an office supply order and was receiving email notices of the progress of the order with projected delivery notifications and finally a notice it had been delivered. I hadn't seen it, but they kept saying it had been delivered. Finally, they sent me a picture of the location of delivery. It had been left at the doors on the Northwest corner of the church on Monday morning. We only use that door on Sunday mornings, so no one would have seen it. In the meantime, it had snowed, and the steps had been shoveled off with the package, so I had to dig the package out of the snow from behind the bush.

It has not been uncommon for people not to know which door to use when coming to the church – we only have six possible entrances, some of which are used infrequently if at all. Our signage may not be all that welcoming or informative, so when I received an email offering a free feather flag for the first two hundred respondents, I jumped right on that, and we've had a flag at the Church office door with our name and logo on it. I'm hoping that gives people more direction. It is also transportable, so we can move to any door or even take it off-site to our Brat Frys at the Piggly Wiggly.

Just finding the sanctuary or the choir room or the restrooms can be challenging when people have never been in our church complex before. Hospitality is so important in making people feel welcome and comfortable. Hospitality and a spirit of welcome is something that we need to be constantly aware of. We know our way around, but newcomers and guests do not.

Welcoming and accepting are at the heart of our reading from Acts today and not just today, but for the last several chapters. Our reading today is at the end of three stories about welcoming and belonging.

Earlier in chapter 10, Peter and Cornelius receive a vision and a visit that changed them. Peter's visions and visit convince him to cross the threshold between the Jewish and Gentile worlds and to begin intentionally leading non-Jews to Christ. In verses 9-16, Peter is given a vision of animals lowered down to him from heaven -- animals that he is told he may eat, even though they are not kosher according to Jewish dietary laws. Peter objects to eating the unclean animals, but God responds by saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean" (v. 15).

Symbolically, Peter's objection to introducing into his body those foods that have been judged unclean represents the Jewish Christian community's objection to introducing into the body of Christ Gentile converts who were

considered unclean. God's response initially confuses Peter, however, because he has yet to meet the real subject of the vision, namely Cornelius.

Acts 10 actually begins, not with Peter, but with Cornelius, the Gentile who has a vision from God to send for Peter and listen to his message. He then sends messengers to visit Peter, to ask him to come speak to Cornelius in Caesarea. Cornelius then becomes the person within the early church who is symbolized by the unclean food of Peter's vision. Only if Peter will follow his vision and disregard the rules of purity is there any chance of this "unclean" person entering the Christian community.

In this post-Easter season, I have been drawn to the Sunday readings from Acts. I am anticipating and preparing for changes in my personal life which will affect the church and the church is facing changes as well – financial changes in addition to other changes. The Waupun United Methodist Church recently revisited and accepted a new Mission Statement that illuminates and may change the future of the Church. The United Methodist Church just completed its General Conference right now and that will result in changes in the future. In that the Wisconsin Annual Conference has experienced disaffiliations and is downsizing from 5 District Superintendents to 4, the Waupun UMC is moving to a different District and a different District Superintendent. Furthermore, the Wisconsin Conference is yoking with the Northern Illinois Conference, and we will have a new Bishop this year. Just as the early Church was experiencing growth and change, and as are we, so these readings from Acts have been on my mind.

What does it mean to be church? What does it mean to be a Church member? What does it mean to be a United Methodist? What does it mean to be a Christian? How does baptism affect our identify and standing? Is it about belief? About action? About motivation? You may remember last week's reading from Acts wherein the Ethiopian Eunuch asked Philip, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" In this week's reading from Acts, Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" it begs the question, "Who is one of us and who is excluded?"

In the excerpt from the first epistle of John, the author makes the same point twice: Everyone. Did you hear that? EVERYONE who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God. Everyone. And everyone who loves the parent (Jesus) loves the child (other Christians).

That all sounds well and good and no big deal until we pause and think for a moment about that one word: EVERYONE. For many Christians, that word is a problem. Our natural tendency is to divide and separate people into groups. We accept some and reject others. We welcome some and close the

door to others. Our natural tendency is to control the door. Our desire is to be the security guard who stands at the door of the heavenly disco, letting a few in and keeping most out although we may not be as intentionally exclusive as that. It's just that we are more comfortable with people who are like us and less inclined to associate with those who are different than us.

Perhaps you've heard the saying, "Blood is thicker than water" more than once in your lifetime. A popular maxim, it's meant to illustrate that relationships within a family (bloodline) are the strongest and most important bonds there can be.

Interestingly, that's only part of the quote, and the intended meaning of the phrase is actually the opposite of what we take it to be. Commonly accepted to have originated in the Church of England, the full saying goes, "The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb," which means that the relationships we choose *for ourselves* are stronger than the ones we inherit through family lines.

In our reading from Acts today, Peter and the early church are faced with a conundrum. Non-Christians, non-Jews, have received the Holy Spirit! Peter says in 10:35, "In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right." John writes in his first Letter today, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God."

Peter, who was speaking to Jews from all over the known world at Pentecost, kick-started the church into existence, is now speaking to non-Jews. He gives the house of Cornelius a crash course in Christianity. His opening message is startling: God is not Jewish, not Roman, not Asian, not American, and not European. God is transcultural and "anyone who fears him and does what is right (10:35)" is acceptable to God! That was momentous and shocking for them, but old hat for us. We've lived with a cross-cultural church for centuries.

The tension in the Jerusalem church was between purity and diversity, a struggle that we are still experiencing today. Around the church, we see some Christians who believe in purity -- people who want to enforce traditional morality and beloved theological dogmas.

Yet, other Christians are proponents of diversity and Christians who want to accept a broader range of theological and cultural perspectives.

Disagreements are bound to arise in a time of disruption. Christian churches don't all agree about homosexuality, premarital sex, medical ethics, the ordination or participation of women, the morality of war or the nature of Jesus Christ. Such tensions are particularly tricky because they do not all break down clearly into right and wrong or good versus evil. The delicate balance between purity and diversity or conservative, traditional, and blending is one

that challenges both pastors and church members. The whole Church struggles with it and individuals in churches may too.

The United Methodist General Conference just concluded, and decisions were made that change the course of history and will have far-reaching implications. Every day the news is filled with protests and violence on college campuses surrounding the Israeli-Hamas conflict. It can be hard to know who is right and who is wrong - which side is just and which side is unjust. What are the principles that we need to hold on to and which are changed by inspiration from God's Holy Spirit?

I think that is why it is good that we spent time revisiting, discussing, thinking about, and praying over an updated Mission Statement last year. 1 John 5:1-6 is a good starting place to consider what we actually do know and believe. We need to be a church which is constantly growing in faith and coming closer to God's will and desire for the world. Stuck in the past or stuck in a rut is not a way to reach out to new generations which think and live differently than before. We need to be a church which is "born again" every day.

The portion of John's Letter that we read today takes up the same theme as the text from Acts when it maintains in 5:1 that everyone who believes in Jesus is "born of God." John uses family relationships to describe the connection and commitment that should exist between those who have experienced new birth in God. Only through faith do we discover the family ties that bind all humanity, and all creation, together.

While our faith may result in brotherly and sisterly love, John does not leave it at that. Verses 2 and 3 make it clear that true faith-inspired love takes a definitive shape. Everyone who loves God loves others. Actions show our love.

Perhaps, like Peter in Acts 10, it's time to ask God to do a new thing in our lives. To:

- Identify and embrace our core values
- Explore all of our options
- Be thankful in all things
- Dream new dreams
- Keep a record of our progress
- Enlist support from the saints of the past and the saints of the present
- Be filled with the Holy Spirit

The bottom line, I think, is spoken well by one commentator on 1 John who wrote: "If Christ occupies the center at which faith comes into focus, then other things, however important, do not." Jesus needs to be the cornerstone of our faith and the ongoing revelation of God's love in and through the Holy Spirit.