

“An Open Table”

September 6, 2020

Old School: Party Time series - Labor Day weekend – Livestream

The Book of Acts offers stories of people coming to faith and gives us stories of people of faith growing and changing - even coming to new understandings about who God is and how God calls us to be in the world. Acts is filled with the Holy Spirit’s work - how the Spirit leads, guides, convicts, challenges, and even brings people together.

We’ve been talking about celebrations - the holy feast days that our faith ancestors celebrated together, community events like weddings where people came together for days, and today’s reading from Acts - not necessarily a celebration at the outset, but a moment of great significance and really a celebration of how widely God’s love reaches.

Peter and Cornelius - as opposite as two people can be: Peter, a Jewish Christian, and Cornelius, a Roman centurion (a commander of soldiers) - a Gentile who is seeking God, has a giving spirit, and is prayerful. Most of the time, we focus on Peter’s sermon in Acts 10, but the background story is so important. Peter preaches because he and Cornelius have Holy Spirit-led visions that lead them to one another and change the church.

Have you had a moment when meeting some new has changed your perspective? How about a time when sharing a meal has nurtured a relationship between you and someone else? For me, spending time with Ivan changed my life. We spent a lot of time drinking vending machine coffee in the basement of the Kirkhof Center when we were in college at Grand Valley. Hearing his perspective – then and now – is a blessing to me. So much can happen when we take time to share with others - to get to know them. God calls us into connection with each other.

SHOW SLIDE This is an ad for Open Table - an app that helps you make restaurant reservations. Peter’s vision challenges him to see that God’s table really **is** open. There’s much more room than he thought. He has to hear God’s command three times, but eventually he gets it. He understands that his assumptions about whom God calls and who is included are wrong. He has to extend the table - put another leaf in - and make room for Cornelius.

Writer Rosaria Butterfield says that hospitality is “ground zero” of Christian faith because of her own powerful experience. She came to faith in Christ because of an invitation to someone’s dinner table. It was the beginning of a long journey toward believing, but it started because a couple invited her to eat with them. They didn’t share

a lot in common with her, but dialogue and table fellowship built a foundation of respect and trust.

She writes, “Radically ordinary hospitality—those who live it see strangers as neighbors and neighbors as family of God. They recoil at reducing a person to a category or a label. They see God’s image reflected in the eyes of every human being on earth. They know they are like meth addicts and sex-trade workers. They take their own sin seriously—including the sin of selfishness and pride. They take God’s holiness and goodness seriously. They use the Bible as a lifeline, with no exceptions.” Butterfield says that our homes can become God’s gift to be used for the building of God’s Kingdom through relationships.

It all sounds right and great, but true hospitality can be an incredible challenge, especially because we tend to be around people who are like us – look like us, think like us, and act like us. We are sometimes so quick to limit who can sit at the table. We don’t set up enough seats. We think we know how God wants it to be.

Peter’s vision is a reminder that sometimes we need to unlearn some things in order to live out God’s vision. Peter knew the dietary laws from Leviticus, but he had to unlearn them and the religious and ethnic exclusivism that he claimed. His vision was too narrow. Rather than focusing on the laws, he learns that God’s focus is on two things: fearing God (attitude) and doing what’s right (behavior).

God doesn’t care about how someone was raised or where someone came from. God simply cares about them and welcomes them. We create so many boundaries that divide us, but they destroy us and keep us apart. Racism, sexism, classism, ageism, nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia, and every other prejudice we hold are not the way of God, but we struggle to see beyond them. But no matter how many ways we can think of to divide ourselves, God seeks to bring us together.

Perhaps there are assumptions we have held onto for a long time. Who’s in? Who’s out? Tradition can be a wonderful thing that keeps us connected, but it can also keep us from seeing a new vision. I wonder what God is calling us to see right now? What does ministry look like going forward? We’ll be livestreaming worship, and that will change some things. How do we welcome people online?

How can we use the space we have for ministry and hospitality? In the past few months, our parking lot has become a place of connection - for neighbors who are teaching kids to ride a bike or playing basketball or people simply gathering outside for meetings. Our kids and youth gathered here with bikes and chalk - and there were bubbles and lots of joy just like we saw in the video today!

What role does the church - the Body of Christ - play in this moment when we’re reckoning with racism and injustice, especially affecting persons whose skin is black and

brown? This isn't new news, but it's a time to look at ourselves, do the work of self-examination and honest reflection, and pray for God's help to dismantle racism. Racism has no place in the church or the world, but it's still a reality. Racism is sin that infects our hearts and souls personally and infects larger systems.

God is always calling us to be transformed, and this account in Acts is a conversion story. Yes, Cornelius and his family and friends come to faith, but Peter is transformed, too. Peter sees a vision of God's inclusive love for both Jews and Gentiles. He proclaims that God plays no favorites; God seeks connection with everyone. All of them experience God in a powerful way and see a new thing that God is doing, a new way that God is moving, and a new community that God is building.

And hospitality is a key ingredient. Peter welcomes the men who come to get him. Cornelius welcomes Peter. Hospitality helps us to overcome barriers and limits that we put on God and each other. Hospitality can be a turning point for transformation. It's literally opening a door and inviting others in, but it's also opening ourselves to new relationships that can be life-changing.

SHOW SLIDE "When you have more than you need, build a bigger table, not a higher fence." You may have seen this somewhere on social media. There's a call here to extend the table - to be as lavish and giving to others as God is to us. We need to hear the clear call to hospitality as followers of Jesus, especially as we hear the opposite from so many voices. Bishop Will Willimon says, "Christianity's default position...is hospitality — hospitality that is based upon God's hospitality of us in our otherness in the cross of Jesus Christ." Jesus takes away the boundaries and borders and "otherness" we've focused on and unites us into a community of faith.

The words of the Gospel challenge us: God so loved the world...not the United States or certain people in the United States. God so loved the world...not just the people who are like me or like-minded. God so loved the world, and Christ died for all. Sir Thomas More's prayer is poignant as we consider the desires of our hearts when it comes to welcoming all: "The things, good Lord, that I pray for, give me Thy grace to labour for. Amen." *Dear God, give us grace to labor for what we pray for.*

It's not enough to pray without attending to the need for action. If we want the world to be more welcoming, if we want the church to be a more welcoming place, if we really want the table to be open, then we have to do the work of examining our hearts, having courageous conversations, and reaching out to others.

So here's the rest of the story...

SHOW SLIDE Acts 10: 44-48

⁴⁴Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed

that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, ⁴⁷“Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” ⁴⁸So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

The Holy Spirit is a Comforter, but sometimes a Disrupter! Here in Acts, the Spirit has a main role to break down the barriers between people. God’s prevenient grace (grace that comes before we even recognize it) is working through the Spirit, and no boundary is impassable! This is a Pentecost moment. The Spirit is poured out on Gentiles and given to Jewish Christians to see a new vision. Jesus is Lord of all - not of some. We come to Christ by faith - all of us - not by pedigree.

Hugh Halter writes, “In Acts 10 we have a story of two parties that changed the church and, in turn, changed the world. The first happened when Peter invited some Roman men into the home where he was staying, and the second happened when the Roman men reciprocated and invited Peter into their home. Both open tables tore down long held barriers between people groups, between faith and doubt. The table was the place people were accepted and served. It’s where personal stories tore down assumptions, judgments, stereotypes, and fears that kept the gospel from doing its work.”

God rejoices when people come to faith. God rejoices when lives are transformed by grace, when our perspective changes and moves us closer to God’s vision. This meeting between Peter and Cornelius becomes a time of worship and celebration! The table is open. People are baptized, and Peter stays! It’s not always about us taking our faith to others; sometimes we learn about our faith from others.

Where is the Holy Spirit trying to break through and bring us closer to God’s vision for the world? To whom are you being pushed toward? What conversations are you having with the Spirit’s leading? What is God saying to you through them? What vision is God showing you?

May we see God’s vision of an open table so that we might see God’s Kingdom come.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE and the LORD’S PRAYER