

## Walk Right In, Sit Right Down

January 20, 2008

The Bible passage we have this morning needs a little setup to understand fully what's going on. The preamble to our passage tells of a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who although he is leading the occupation of the country, is a good and devout man. He has not converted to Judaism, but he participates in the synagogue and contributes to its causes. Cornelius has a dream, a vision—a phenomenon which is often understood as God breaking through to the receiver. In this vision, Cornelius send for Peter, whom he does not know.

At close to the same time, Peter is in another city, and he also has a dream, a vision. His is of a sheet coming down from heaven filled with all sorts of animals and birds, and Peter is told to kill and eat the animals. That's against the kosher laws, and he claims that he's never done such a thing. However, as the Message Bible puts it: "If God says it's okay, it's okay."

Now Peter thinks this has only to do with food, and he comes to the realization that God doesn't put those kinds of taboos on the front burner. However, the greater message is yet to come, because those sent by Cornelius arrive, and bid Peter come with them. That's also a no-no—to mix with the gentiles, or those considered to be unclean. However, Peter agrees to accompany the travelers, and meets Cornelius. It's then that the full revelation of God's message to Peter comes clear: there are no insiders or outsiders when it comes to God's family.

Peter then shares his sermon that makes up our Bible passage for today. This is how the passage reads: "Peter fairly exploded with his good news: 'It's God's own truth; nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are and where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open.'"

Bishop Will Willimon was a dean and professor at Duke Divinity School, and in his commentary on this passage in Acts, he writes,

"Conversion to Christ becomes a mundane matter of 'Who shall eat at our table?'" In other words, in all comes down to realizing that no one is outside God's love, and everyone is welcome at God's table.

Now, that all sounds well and good theologically-speaking, but how do we put that theology into practice. Are we willing, as Peter was, to allow God's love to seep into our hearts in such a way that we are willing to welcome and include those whom we previously might have excluded? Those are questions with which we must wrestle if we want to claim to be faithful people. Where do we start? What actions are required of us?

Of course, it has to start with a change of heart for many of us. We can respond intellectually that we are, of course, inclusive and welcoming of all, but often our hearts are not in the same place as our heads. We may know something in our minds, but it takes a while for our emotional make-up to catch up and let go of some preconceived notions and even prejudices. Nonetheless, if we are children of God, God is asking no less from us than that. We have to be willing to change our minds about some of our past beliefs and convictions, and allow our hearts to be transformed by God's love.

Here at The Garden, we state "Inclusiveness" as one of our core values. What do we mean by that? If we go tot the dictionary and look up the word, we'll find that it means "taking a great deal or everything within its scope," including the extremes or limits and everything in-between. That's a pretty encompassing definition, but what we intend it to mean in our usage here is that everyone is welcome and accepted in our midst. In some ways it's very much like Peter's message: "God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are and where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open." We really want to live that out here, and hope that you do, too.

The value of inclusiveness isn't just ours alone. The denomination of which I am a part, the United Methodist Church, has as its slogan for a national advertising campaign: "Open hearts, open minds, open doors: The People of the United Methodist Church." In fact, the

denomination's statement about inclusiveness says, "We recognize that God made all creation and saw that it was good...We are called to be faithful to the example of Jesus' ministry to all persons."

I have to be honest with you and say that we use those words; we claim the vision, but I often wonder if we are really living it out—as communities of faith, as people of faith. I say that because you've probably heard some of the news stories, as I have, of those who have been intentionally excluded from our congregations because of biases and prejudices. Open hearts, open minds, open doors? Not always, I'm afraid.

The UMC is not the only church or organization guilty of claiming lofty ideals, but failing to live up to them. Recently, I had an experience that continues to bother me a bit. I was in Houston with the group of pastors from across the nations of which I am a part, and we had the opportunity to visit the site and meet some of the people associated with a very high profile TV evangelist personality.

In the course of our time of questions and answers, the representative from the church stated that they were a very open, welcoming, accepting congregation. Thinking I had perhaps stumbled upon a TV evangelist a bit different from the norm, I asked a question. "Does that mean that you are open and welcoming to gays and lesbians?" I asked. "Yes," was the answer. "They are welcome to come here, and we have groups that help them change."

As you can imagine that brought up some other conversations as our group reconvened, but for my part, I have to say that that did not feel like open, welcoming and accepting. To be open and accepting means that we have to welcome people as they are. It's not up to us to change anyone, but to welcome and include everyone. To imply that someone must change to be a part in some way means that we are judging that person as unacceptable or unfit to be among us. That's not my understanding of what it means to be inclusive.

So, OK. What does it mean for you and me to follow the example of Jesus? Who is at our table? Who's welcome and who's

included? How do we make sure our tables always have room for others?

To a degree, it has a lot to do with hospitality, and by that, I don't just mean a friendly greeting at the door, or a cup of coffee and a bagel. It means making sure we have enough places at the table. We've talked about this before here, but many of us have gotten into a rut when it comes to always sitting in the same places and with the same people.

While I understand that we want the time to visit and enjoy our friends, it also means that we aren't allowing space at our table for anyone else to come. Each week when we arrive, maybe we need to ask ourselves the question, "Who's at our table?" along with "Who else can be at our table?" That's a simple thing, but I believe it can make a difference and move us closer to making inclusiveness the real thing and not just a word.

What else does it mean to follow the example of Jesus? I think it means we have to be willing to look at everyone around us as our brothers and sisters, and not always see the differences of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic status, education and more that often can set us apart and separate us. And it's not just a matter of tolerating those who are in whatever way different from us; it's a matter of realizing we are interconnected and interdependent.

Our well-being is very much wrapped up with the well-being of all our brothers and sisters. As Pablo Casals once said, "We ought to think that we are one of the leaves of a tree, and the tree is all humanity. We cannot live without the others, without the tree." We are interconnected, and we need one another.

Today, as we observe Martin Luther King's birthday, I would like us to look beyond the walls that sometimes divide us, and open our arms wide, wider still and offer a huge embrace to all, and say, "Everyone is welcome here," and really mean it.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we remember and take seriously the words of Joseph Campbell, who wrote:

“Today, the planet is the only proper ‘in group.’”

May the living of our lives make it so.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace.

Amen.