

“An Inclusive Church Is Not For Everyone”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

4 March 2018 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

Acts 11:1-18 = Inclusion in God's kingdom

John Buchanan retired some years ago as pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church. Buchanan has served Christ's kingdom in a number of other ways including senior editor of *Christian Century* and moderator of the General Assembly.



Long before Presbyterian reunion, Buchanan said he was invited to preach at a Presbyterian congregation in the deep South. In



the years just after desegregation, he chose to preach on the Genesis, chapter 21, where Hagar and Ishmael are turned away, forced out into the wilderness to die due to Sarah's jealousy.

The approach he took to Hagar and Ishmael was how God heard Ishmael's voice and Hagar's prayer and saved them both. How God gave them a future instead of death. God's love is manifest not just to the lady of the household and the hereditary heir, but just as well to the slave girl and her son born on the wrong side of the blanket.



After the service, remember this was just after desegregation, one great Southern lady got the point only too well. On shaking Buchanan's hand she said: "I'm so glad you're going back up North. I hated that sermon!"

She got the point, but in getting the point, she totally missed it as well. It's always easier to blame the messenger than to let God's message in. So much easier for us to make excuses, put up blinders and close our ears to God's message when God asks us to do something we don't like or we don't want to do.

We think we are immune to this bigotry, yet when God asked Peter to minister to a gentile family, he had exactly that same response of disgust, excuses, blinders and a mind closed by culture and tradition.



Peter was granted an unsettling vision. Three times he was ordered to kill, slaughter and eat animals which are expressly forbidden in the Torah. Peter, a devote Jew all his life, found this more than unsettling. Each time he refused, the voice from heaven responded: **“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”**



As he was meditating on this strange vision, an envoy arrived from the Roman officer Cornelius. Peter’s first reaction was to refuse. As a Jew Peter could have no social interaction whatsoever with a Gentile, much less enter a Gentile house. The law expressly forbids it.

Yet under compulsion from that inexplicable vision, the Holy Spirit led Peter to share the Gospel with Cornelius and his family. Peter’s memorable words when he crossed this forbidding barrier:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.”¹



“I truly understand that God Shows no partiality”

What a transformation! Peter discovers as Jesus had said before, as Steven had discovered in the Ethiopian Eunuch, and as Paul discovers after: there is no ethnicity test in God’s kingdom, no means test, no gender test, not even a test for theological orientation. Everyone is embraced who acts justly, loves mercy and walks humbly with God ~ every person is invited ~ all are in!

The infant Jesus movement has just crossed the great divide. The tiny movement of the Way is at a decisive moment ~ whether to remain within Judaism or for God’s love to break out, to overflow, as God is calling for the Christian movement to become a world religion inclusive of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, of all races, of all classes and much more. The stakes couldn’t be higher.

Yet there are always holdouts. When Peter rejoins the other Apostles, they harshly criticize him for ministering to



a Gentile household. According to Jewish law, Peter was now polluted, corrupted. For these other Apostles and for many today, such an inclusive church is not what they choose ~ not a church for “those folks” over there, however we choose to define “those folks.”

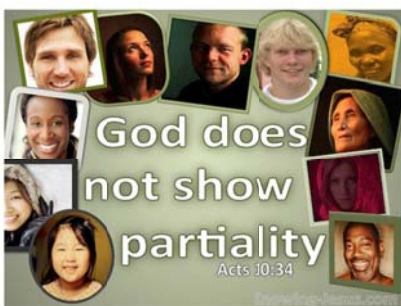
Paradoxically, “an inclusive church is not for everyone.”

So both Peter and Cornelius were part of God’s master plan ~ as are we. We see God’s love being transmitted through Peter to that single Cornelius household, a pagan and hated Roman official. God’s love breaks our human barriers down, flooding God’s love over the edges to the ones we least expect. God’s love flows out through us to family and friends. We shouldn’t bottle it up, but unconsciously we often do.



God shows us the Way, yet we seldom get this right. Unless we constantly seek God’s direction, we seldom focus our witness and our compassion on those whom God desires for us to love. God’s plan includes shattering our ideas of right and wrong ~ shattering our ideas of who is acceptable to God and who is not ~ of who is in and who is out of God’s kingdom plan.

Peter’s important lesson with Cornelius’ household: there is no one God does not want to save, cannot save; no one God does not love; no one who is outside God’s plan.



We believe God redeems everyone, but in our heart we all make exceptions. “How could God possibly love him?” “She is so hateful, so toxic, so mean.” “How could God possibly love ‘those people’ as much as God loves me? I don’t have to love them either.”

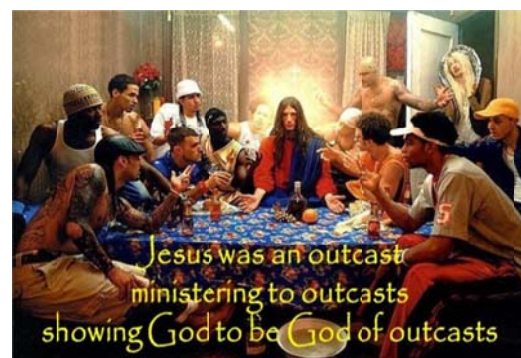
Think: what person or persons in your life is so awful that you think they are outside God’s grace, unworthy of God’s love?

Think: want bigots here? No we don’t. But Jesus came for bigots. Want racists here? No. Yet Jesus came to redeem racists too. Want intolerants here, conservatives, liberals? Jesus came to transform intolerance, conservatism and liberalism. Sinners? Jesus came for sinners, too.

With our limited vision, we hold exceptions not for us, but for “those other folks.” We all have a list of certain sins which are unforgivable, sins God can forgive but which we cannot. Sins we condemn in other folks. This is the log in our own eye as we condemn the tiny fleck in someone else’s. Jesus came for all, even the people we don’t like, don’t respect, even those towards whom we feel morally superior.

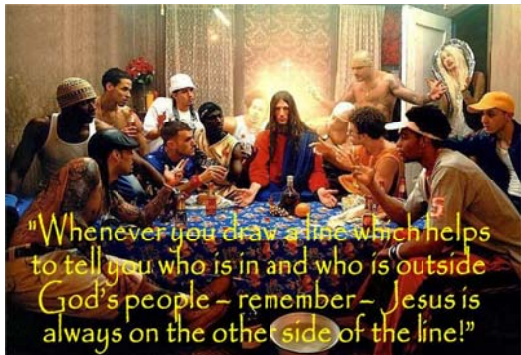
If we are practicing the kingdom and walking God’s path, then we welcome all into our life and fellowship, despite our strong feelings of exclusion.

Peter with a seared conscience was compelled against his will, driven by the Holy Spirit to carry the Gospel to the gentiles. Not just any gentile, but a Centurion, Cornelius, one of the hated, despised, disgusting Roman oppressors.



“How could God possibly....?”

Yet Peter surprised even himself and was led to a deep truth:



“Whenever you draw a line which helps to tell you who is in and who is outside God’s people ~ remember ~ Jesus is always on the other side of the line!”²

As individuals we do put a high premium on tolerance, acceptance and inclusion. We aspire to welcome everyone, to be an inclusive church. We do a good job of welcoming folks who don’t always look like us, don’t dress like us, don’t act like us. Yet maybe we don’t do such a good job with folks whose families don’t look like ours, who don’t think like us, don’t believe the same way we do. God is always stretching us further, desiring us to widen our horizons.



No bouncers at our doors. No gatekeepers need apply. Let’s aspire to continue to be a congregation where families and people different from ourselves are welcomed, included and empowered. So God’s love

outflows through us to family and friends. For of such is the kingdom of heaven.

“A truly inclusive church is for us.”



¹ Acts 10:34-35 (NRSV)

² Richard Jensen, *Preaching Mark*, p.61