

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

John 13:31-35

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I do believe I've mentioned before that early on in our church, before the church was really a church yet, there were discussions and arguments over whether or not Gentiles (non-Jews) could become Followers of the Way. And if they were to be allowed to then what did they need to do? Did they need to be circumcised? Did they need to BE Jewish before they could become Christian? Does it seem kind of silly to anyone else here that the earliest followers of Jesus spent a lot of time discussing and arguing about whether or not Gentiles could become followers of Jesus? Yet this was a very serious issue for years just after Jesus died. A few weeks back we recalled Saul on the road to Damascus being struck to the ground and struck down for persecuting Jesus followers. He was specifically called to bring non-Jews to love Christ even though he himself was a Jew and would remain a Jew. What must the other Disciples have thought about that?

Simple answer- at first they were terrified. The man had been a killer of the disciples. He was known for rounding them up, imprisoning them; torturing them. The other Disciples would have needed to be brought onboard with this idea somehow. But the disciples did come around. They accepted Paul in spite of his "background" as a persecutor of Christians. And our Acts reading for today explains to us how Peter came around to understanding that the Gentiles were to be accepted.

This reading from Acts helps us to understand just how inclusive our faith is meant to be. Peter responds to his vision of the "great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners," by testifying that he cannot eat any of the various animals appearing there. But when God

responds with a final word that all now have been cleansed, the welcome mat is clearly out. Peter Gomes, former pastor of Harvard's University Memorial Church, writes that "Paul and Peter were calling on the church to acknowledge what God was doing, even though it scandalized the church and seemed to go against scripture tradition. God gives the same gift of the Spirit to all. And Peter said, 'Then, who am I that I could hinder God?'" Whom then, in all the world, do I exclude from our fellowship today?¹

The word "Ironic" is a good word to describe some of the stands we observe members of our faith taking. It is ironic that we Christians claim to accept and love and forgive everyone, yet too many of us ostracize entire groups of people.

Some of us seem to have a fear of 'going against Scripture', and yet time and again we read that Jesus contradicted quite a bit of what was being taught as Law by the Jews. HE spent his time making changes. He worked at helping people to open their hearts to the "least of these" and to pretty much anyone, for that matter.

One example of this happens when we lump all Muslims together and try to exclude them because of a very fringe group of people who CALL themselves Muslim but Muslim's do not consider Muslims at all. Here's just one example. In fact, true Muslims have very similar beliefs to ours. AND they know and respect Jesus as an important prophet. The Muslim faith, I'm sure you've heard, was born out of our Old Testament.

It is a challenge for us to love everyone. We all like to say that we would welcome anyone into the church. But do we really mean anyone? Think about this question because there are no pat answers to the questions I ask you. What would you expect of the church;

¹ Paul Christenson. Retired. Master of Divinity, 1959

how would you feel if a person who was on the Sex Offender list came into our church, was honest about where he was coming from, wanted to find a spiritual home, and chose us.

Jesus said, “when you have done it to the least of these, my children, you have done it to me.” What about a person who was recovering from an addiction to heroine? Would you welcome that person with open arms?

These are very difficult questions and there are no easy answers but I know that these situations have come up in churches.

But, excluding people is hard work- much harder than being accepting of everyone. It requires us to be judge and jury when someone comes to the door and asks to be let in. When I was pastor at MUCC I received a letter and then a phone call from a man who wanted to use our church for a 12 Step program. We’d talked in Council about inviting outside groups so initially I was excited. But when I discovered that this 12 Step group was for sex addicts, suddenly it seemed too risky to get involved. Was I wrong? I would not have minded personally, but I knew what the response among some church members would be. It seemed too risky. People would leave the church. And yet this situation would have been; could have been quite the learning opportunity here.

I want to tell you a story written for Sojourners magazine by Jennifer Bailey. It’s a true story and it isn’t a funny story but it is a story with a happy ending.

I will never forget the day my friend Aaron* asked me if God loved even him. It was a few years into high school and on the way to school, he asked me if “my God” loved him.....

Our friends made fun of him all the time and my school had one of the first LGBTQ clubs. Aaron was unusual. He wore tight, tight T shirts and lace gloves, like Michael Jackson. Aaron did well in spite of it all the abuse. I learned recently that Aaron is now Erin, a

transgender woman. She's fun, happy, creative and loving. And she is truly a child of God, made in the image of God .²

I have my own similar story. At one of my previous churches there were two sisters who were looking for a church. They came to see me and confided in me that they were not sisters at all, but they were married. Charlene had been Charles but figured out during the course of her life that she was born into the wrong body.

These are not situations where someone suddenly decides it would be fun to be the opposite sex. These are situations where people are literally born into the wrong body, and their gender identity was assigned at the moment they are seen at birth by a doctor or nurse or in a sonogram weeks earlier. Suddenly rooms are decorated in blue or pink; clothing has lots of lavender ruffles or football symbols. Yet in utero hormones come and go. Sometimes the way they do this does not mesh with the physical reality.

Gender Identity is a topic that young people are all over today. So it's good for us to have an understanding.

I know that this is a tough topic. Yet with the death of Prince this week, we are getting a fist hand look at how fluid gender identity can be. And as we consider what it means to really be an inclusive church, we have a lot of important questions to consider.

God offers and teaches us love and acceptance through Jesus Christ. When Jesus came to us as the Christ HE said this:

² By Jennifer Bailey 04-22-2016 Sojourners

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Yet time and again we are taught by some Christians and by politicians, by our parents, by the news, that SOME of God’s creation is a mistake; some of creation doesn’t matter; doesn’t deserve to live.

I have a challenge for someone in this sanctuary. This is a call to you who may be feeling this sermon in a heartfelt way to offer a study here at the church about Gender Identity; about what it is and how the perception of it has changed. Come together to share your stories and help one another to understand and to examine this in the most honest way.

The UCC IS a church of FIRSTS- and proudly.

2003, "Reaffirming the United Church of Christ's Denouncement of Violence Against Lesbian and Gay People and Calling for the Inclusion of Transgender people within that Anti-violence Statement", 24th General Synod

People who struggle with Gender Identity continue to be the most feared, most hated, most murdered population in our world.

At our Bible Study we talked about the two readings for today, mainly focusing on the reading from Acts where Peter tells of the vision he received from God, letting him know that the acceptance of Gentiles was OK. Acceptance is such an important word when we think on the variety and diversity of this world of ours. I never dreamed that as I wrote my sermon I would end up here where I am today in this topic. But this IS how the Holy Spirit works in ministers.

If this message has made you think, well, I'm glad for that. This is always the intention of a sermon. If this message has made you uncomfortable or angry, I surely understand. I, myself have only been actively thinking about these issues for the past few years. I encourage you to set up a time to come to talk to me. I will listen. I will simply listen because that, my friends, is one of the most important things I've been called here to do.

God loves us. God walks these very difficult journeys with us. People know we are Christians by our love. We like to sing this song. But can we sing it and mean it?

Can we?

Let us pray-- *Lord, may I grow in faith to honestly embrace all humankind. Amen.*