

Unity
United Church of Broomfield
January 8, 2023

Acts 10:34-43 NRSVue

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every people anyone who fears him, and practices righteousness is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Perhaps *the* most critical issue for the early church was the matter of Jews and non-Jews/Gentiles. First and foremost: Did non-Jews have full access to the salvation of God in Jesus Christ? Second and more practically important: If non-Jews are full heirs of the promise to Abraham in Christ, how then should the Jew and the non-Jew relate to one another and live together? More simply: who's in and who's not in? And...how do we treat one another?

The book of Acts is focused upon these questions, as is Paul's letter to the Galatians. The second question is the focus of the Jerusalem Council that is discussed in Acts 15. The prior, more fundamental question is addressed in chapter 10 of Acts.

Today's passage, specifically from Acts 10:34-43, focuses on Peter's discourse concerning Jesus; he is trying to make the case for Jesus. He starts out with a curious greeting. Basically, he says, "I understand that God accepts anyone who holds God in awe and does the right thing." What? Peter's not saying, "Come with Jesus or go to hell," is he? He's not holding a threat of damnation or judgment. Isn't that how conversions often go? An argument about why Christianity is the only way....?

No. Instead, he says, "I get it." God accepts everyone who stands in awe of him and who does the right things.

Wow. That alone had to catch some attention. Then, as now, there aren't a lot of people who can hold an expansive view of things in their hearts as they try to share their experiences of the holy. Most folks, regardless of their tradition, have a need to get everyone to see it their way.

Peter withholds the shaking of the finger and the scowling, scolding demeanor. Instead, he says, "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ...." (Acts 10:36).

Now, in this day of permanent warfare, when we are warned of enemies under every rock, and where those who question are lumped in with the so-called enemies; in this day, when we hear about peace, our hungry and war-scarred spirits go to the logical location. "Preaching peace by Jesus Christ," pulls us inexorably toward

visions of a world where the guns are silent, and where no more children are blown to bits by landmines. Who among us does not desire such a world?

In truth, this isn't the "peace" that the writer of Acts is describing. The "peace" described here has been translated from the Greek word, *eirene*, which really means "unity." In other words, what the writer of Acts is calling for is the unity of the people of Israel in Jesus Christ. We could, of course, go deeper into the fractionalized reality of the Jewish world of the day, which was real for these people, but the point of unity applies to more than just a historical sociological setting of our text. It speaks to us.

As we sit here claiming the reality of the risen Christ, how do we speak to unity in Christ Jesus? What does unity mean to us as a church sitting here today? How, in the resurrection story that we celebrate, do we find unity? What does unity mean to us as a broader Christian community? And more complex is the question concerning unity with those outside our faith community, outside our culture, and our experience? What does unity mean in these circumstances...where God shows no partiality?

Does unity mean that we all agree on the same thing? It's a tough question. But if we take the time to think about it, the answer has to be both "Yes," and "No." It must be "Yes," in that fundamental agreement on basic ideas is at the root of any association we make in our lives.

I volunteer at FISH because I believe that the work done there is essentially good. I give my time and energy to Rotary because I agree with the stated goals of the organization.

Each one of us, I'm sure, could make a long list of the things we participate in because we are in agreement with their agenda or basic principles. The church is no different. Most of us are in church because we are in agreement with the basics about Christian faith. Otherwise, why would we be involved? Indeed, it's not going too far to say that without fundamental consensus on basic principles, no organization can survive for very long.

But the answer to the foregoing question must also be "No," because for us, unity is not necessarily derived from a lock-step agreement with everything that the church says or does. In fact, it strikes me that a community in complete agreement on all things might be just a little boring...and perhaps even dangerous. Indeed, one might argue that respectful and loving diversity of opinion, perspective, and experience are more conducive to unity than is complete agreement.

Yesterday, I was speaking to some friends about the president and founder of *Interfaith America*, Eboo Patel and his book Acts of Faith. In that book, Patel speaks about being a Muslim, but being drawn to Dorothy Day, a devout Catholic. In her 30s, during the Great Depression Dorothy Day had started something called the Catholic Worker Movement, which combined radical politics, direct service, and community living. For nearly half a century, Day had given up on her own middle-class privilege to live with those who went without in what was called a Catholic worker House of hospitality. Many of these "houses" emerged across the country and they were extremely diverse in their languages, foods, cultures, and faiths. As part of his research into religious pluralism, Patel spent much time as a "Catholic Worker," living and working in some of the Houses of Hospitality and recalls that the overall feeling in all of the houses were that they were cultures of kindness, humility, and love. Patel commented that being a "Catholic Worker," made him a better Muslim. Experiences of diversity helped him feel unity.

The question, however, remains. When scripture speaks of preaching the "peace" or unity of Christ, what gives? Perhaps the best answer, in the final analysis, is balance. Perhaps when we look into the new

possibilities brought with Jesus' resurrection, we can look to a new kind of unity that is forged, not in blind agreement, but instead, in the gentle life-giving, grace-filled ebb and flow of God's love.

I finished my seminary degree at Iliff School of Theology here in Denver, which is a seminary associated with the Methodist denomination. There, I learned a quote that is often attributed to John Wesley, the 18th century theologian who led a revival movement within the Church of England that birthed the Methodist tradition. In actuality, the came from Saint Augustine, and it goes like this:

In essentials unity,
In non-essentials, liberty,
But in all things love.

Truly, is this not the essence of new life in the risen Christ?

Unity in the essential embrace of new life in Christ — knowing that all humanity and all creation is of a loving, benevolent creator who wants us to flourish.... now and for eternity.

Freedom from those things that hinder new life – like exclusion, oppression, abandonment, and fear.

And in whatever we undertake – agree, disagree, or “whatever,” – we do so in love.

Let us stand with our teacher and savior, as we move to the graceful, diverse, and flexible rhythms of the resurrection life in Christ Jesus our Lord! Let our peace and our unity be in that self-same love that has gone — and continues to go the distance for us.

Amen

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