

Acts 10:44-11:18

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2024

If God was your friend, would she invite you over?

Is the house of God somewhere you get invited to? Would you carefully take off your shoes, wait for an invitation to the sitting room, and respond that, yes please, tea would be lovely?

Maybe.

Much of the Bible suggests that God has standards. In one of the stranger stories of the Bible, David has conquered Jerusalem. As part of his triumphal entry, he intends to bring the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the presence of God, into the city. The ark is loaded onto an ox cart, and David and everyone else are going ahead of it, playing music and celebrating. But the cart goes over a bump, and the Ark begins to fall out of the cart. One of the attendants, named Uzzah, reaches out to stabilize the Ark, and God strikes him dead for touching the Ark so casually.

Whoah.

The point of the story seems to be that the holiness of God, the high-voltage mysterious *otherness* of God, needs to be taken seriously. If you don't restrict who can touch it and when, pretty soon you'll be picking up the Ark to dust under it, using it as a

flower vase, and losing any sense of respect for God. You lose any sense that your identity as the set-apart, chosen people of God *matters*.

One of the ways that first-century Jews, including Jewish Christians, show this *reverence* is through their dietary rules. There are certain rules for how you eat, what you eat, and, most certainly, *with whom* you eat.

So, you definitely don't show up at God's house without an invitation, you make darn sure you take your shoes off, and you absolutely don't take a tea biscuit unless it's offered.

This is what's in the background of today's reading from Acts.

When God wants to tell Peter She's sending him to preach to some Gentiles, how does she do it? With food. Eating with someone is an intimate act of inclusion. In the same way, did you notice what the Jewish Christians object to? Not that Peter baptized Gentiles, but that he ate with them and stayed at their house.

When we want to respect the holy, we set it aside. We put fences around it. But the unintended message is that the people and things outside of those fences are *unholy*; immoral; dirty; less worthy of respect. It works the other way, as well. That which is familiar, safe, and respectable gets invested with moral and religious value, while everything strange, less respected and possibly unsafe gets branded profane or even sinful.

Today is Mental Health Sunday. It's also Red Dress Day. Two acknowledgments that those living with a mental illness make people uncomfortable, and that settler society has mistreated, marginalized, and stolen from Indigenous people. So long as the Church remains the place for "normal" people, those on the edges of society also tend to be pushed to the edges of the Church.

Indigenous people are exotic and exploitable; violence against women and girls disproportionately targets Indigenous communities. Those with mental illnesses seem strange unpredictable; they are excluded from the workplace. Gay, Lesbian, and Transgendered people cross social boundaries; they are branded as pedophiles and excluded from ministry.

The common denominator is the Church deciding who is in, and who is out. And even when we invite people in, it is clear who belongs here and who is just visiting.

But sometimes our high-voltage God blows the doors wide open.

God tells Peter that She, herself, decides what is clean and unclean, and that She has made all things clean. So Peter is free to meet with the Gentile believers. Not only that, but as Peter is still preaching about Jesus, the Spirit interrupts Peter and descends upon all present without regard to racial and cultural barriers. And so Peter declares that they should be baptized.

Baptism is the rite of entry into the Church. When I do baptism and membership classes with people, I talk about all the ways we understand baptism. Baptism is cleansing from sin. But there is no suggestion of sin in this passage. Baptism invites the presence of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit is already here. Baptism is the culmination of a long period of preparation and instruction in the faith. But these folks have had only half a sermon from Peter.

No, in this passage, baptism is first a sign of commitment to the Way of Christ, and a recognition and celebration of what God has already done. Isn't that what the Church itself is, really? We describe the Church as the Body of Christ, but maybe that's a kind of shorthand. *God's* initiative makes people children of God and citizens of the Kingdom of God, and the Church is that body of people who have formally said yes to God's initiative. We are *all* guests in God's house.

And that's why one little detail in this story is crucially important. These Gentiles don't come to Peter. Peter comes to them, and remains with them several days. Peter eats what they set before him. Peter stays under their roof, sleeps in their beds. Peter is the guest, not the Gentiles. They offer Peter the gift of hospitality, and Peter recognizes them as siblings by accepting. Nobody is an outsider here.

For this reason, Red Dress Day and Mental Health Sunday are not grudging invitations to God's party. They are realizations that Indigenous people, and those living

with disabilities, have lived here all along. The recent lifting of the ban on LGBTQ clergy means that the United Methodist Church has finally caught up to what God is doing.

The house of God is not like your friend's house.

The Kingdom of God is not a marble palace.

It is like your *best* friend's house. It is somewhere you let yourself in, grab a drink from the fridge, push the laundry off the couch, pet the dog, and shout, "hey dude, are you up yet?"

The kingdom of God is not somewhere you are tolerated. It is not somewhere you are invited. It is not even somewhere you are included. It is somewhere you *belong*.