

Hillcrest Congregational UCC

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Loving and Liking Tolerating and Accepting

Scripture: Acts 10:44-48, I John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

In the weeks following Easter our lectionary texts include the stories of the disciples and the early church found in Acts. When Jesus was arrested and crucified, the disciples were in chaos. Even though Jesus told them he would be with them, even though he said he would send them a companion- the Holy Spirit, until they learned to listen and follow the Spirit, there was much that was left for them to figure out. In this time of grieving, confusion, and disorganization, it was only human nature that they would fall back into old habits and traditions.

Like us, they were creatures of their socialization, customs and culture. Unfortunately that meant they forgot or did not understand how to implement what Jesus taught them in the new and strange circumstances in which they found themselves. As people around them heard stories and wanted to know about Jesus and what he taught, the disciples found themselves increasingly exposed to people who were different. Their world became a smaller and smaller place and they had to deal with it.

Last week we heard about Phillip being exposed to an unclean Jew – an untouchable in two ways- Ethiopian (foreign) and Eunuch (not- physically whole). The Holy Spirit told Phillip to get up and go and share the good news with him. This week Peter encounters Cornelius, a Gentile- a non-Jewish, non- circumcized outsider, and even worse, a representative of the oppressive and abusive Roman government. This was a very challenging situation for him. We know from other scriptures that Peter and Paul argued over Paul's mission to the gentiles. Their argument was so serious it could have caused the schism if not the death of the early church.

Again, like the story about Phillip and the Ethiopian convert, this story is not primarily about conversion. And these two stories are not for the Ethiopian Eunuchs and Corneliuses of the world who seek to know God. These stories are lessons for the Phillips and the Peters- the disciples. These stories are for us.

Both stories have the feeling of immediacy and spontaneity. The Ethiopian man asked to be baptized immediately after hearing Phillip. Here Peter was still speaking and the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his family. This astounded Peter and his circumcised Jewish Christian companions- even unclean uncircumcised Gentiles were transformed by the good news!

Before he met Jesus, Peter was taught to avoid this type of people, to not only not accept them but to not tolerate being in their presence. But he is forced to conclude that he must baptize them. Oh how he would have liked to refuse this representative of the oppressive government, this Gentile and his family.

But the Spirit moves where it will. It is all about the transformation of hearts and minds and lives. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide the disciples in their challenging times. The Spirit came to give them understanding in how to apply what Jesus had taught them, and the Spirit did not allow them to take the easy way or fall back on old ways.

And these stories are for us. Are we not our own time of a little bit of confusion and disorganization here in this church during the interim time? Although we hope it will be a time of smooth transition, there are bound to be moments when we need to look to for the guidance of the Spirit and not take the easy way or just rely on old habits.

Our world is also in a big bit of confusion and disorganization and challenging time. As creatures of our socialization, customs and culture we must rely on the Spirit to remind us what Jesus taught in our new and strange circumstances. As we are increasingly exposed to the people around us who are different, we must learn to deal with the world as a smaller and smaller place.

I heard the results of a study the other day. It is done periodically to ask people which religion they identify with. It is not surprising that over the years, religious affiliations in this country have changed from predominantly Christian to become increasingly more diverse. But what is more than surprising, in fact, should be shocking to us and to our brothers and sisters in other religious organizations is another change.

Over time, 5-10% of the people asked “what is your religious affiliation?” have answered “none.” This number can rise as high as 15% depending upon the current situation – say if there has been a Protestant televangelist caught in an embezzlement scandal, or a Catholic priest accused of pedophilia. This is not surprising.

What was surprising is that when this question was asked to younger people, anyone under 40, 30% answered “no religious affiliation.” This is an astounding number. And the reason they gave is even more shocking and disturbing. They have no religious affiliation because they find religions: churches, synagogues, temples, masjids, to be intolerant and bigoted. They find narrow minded, tradition bound, prejudiced organizations unwelcoming and do not want to be a part of them. They will not accept intolerance. And so they are voting with their feet-right out the door.

Just as the disciples experienced, our world has changed and gotten smaller. The young people in the study have met and made friends of people from all faiths, colors, nations, abilities, languages, sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities. They have seen the diversity of God’s creation, and they understand why God calls it good.

The genie has been left out of the bottle and it is not going back in. And we in the church don’t have to tolerate it. We have to pray to learn to accept it. We have to get over ourselves and figure out how to live into this reality this new small world with integrity, empowered by the teachings of our Master Teacher.

In my previous position as Administrator for Search and Call, I had the opportunity to work with all the pastors seeking a call in the churches in our Conference. You will be delighted to know that there are a large number of absolutely excellent candidates. It was a great joy to work with them, and one day you will call one of them to be your settled pastor and will be delighted with him or her.

But there was a down side to the work because I have many friends in other Christian denominations. What was difficult for me to see was the increasing number of excellent clergy I found searching for a call in the United Church of Christ because they no longer felt welcome in their own denomination. They no longer felt comfortable in the denomination in which they

grew up, were ordained, and in some cases had served for many years. What is a boon to us is a great loss to their denominations.

Metropolitan Community Church, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist, AME, Church of Latter Day Saints, Orthodox, from this state, this country, and other countries in the world. They are leaving their denomination for the UCC because of our radical welcome to people of all colors, all ages, all genders, all abilities and disabilities, all sexual orientations, and all gender identities.

They are coming to an Open and Affirming, Peace with Justice, Multicultural, accessible to all church, not because they are being kicked out of their denominations- they could stay. But they have grown tired of butting their heads against the walls of intolerance. They perceive us to be a denomination that seeks to practice the unconditional love we believe Jesus the Christ taught us that our God has for each and every one of us. They want to be part of a ministry to people with this unconditional love and radical hospitality.

But there's the rub. Our reputation precedes us. It prods us. It drags us into the future. We are known as the ONA, Peace with Justice, multicultural, accessible to all church. What a great thing! But we have to learn to live into it.

If we want to grow in spirit and numbers, if we want to draw the un-churched and the de-churched, if we want to welcome and keep the younger and the elder who are seeking understanding and who will not accept intolerance, we have live into our reputation and to use our reputation to motivate us to be who we are called to be- God's Beloved Community.

There are plenty of people out there who are tired of inequality, patriarchy, economic injustice, hierarchicalism, racism, bigotry, greed, and prejudice. They are tired of the physical, emotional and spiritual violence and fear. And we have the antidote! And Jesus and the author of the Gospel according to John and the Johannine letters tell us what it is. Love.

We hear in the scripture that Jesus and our Parent God love us so much, they can't imagine how we could not also love each other. This love does not necessarily include liking, and it is not mushy words. Carmelo Alvarez reminds us that "communion, or koinonia, includes the sharing of human resources, material goods, and communal fellowship ... a commitment of solidarity toward unity as a witness in a broken and divided world." This love is an unselfish love, an other-centered, belonging-to-something-greater-than-yourself love.

This is the love that was crucial to the disciples and tiny community, the first church. And it is crucial to us. In times of trouble, perceived scarcity, or chaos in our world, or even good times, or relatively stable times, we are tempted to turn inward, loving God (of course) and one another, and concentrating on our own survival here. But Jesus calls us to a higher mission, a love one that will transform us and the world rather than judge or run away from it.

This then is the answer to the question that is asked continually, how do we grow our church? We do it with this tolerating, accepting, unselfish, other-centered-belonging-to-something-other-than-ourselves love. And we find ways to live it actively, daily, publicly. Not only will this let the people who don't want to be part of unwelcoming, narrow minded, tradition bound, prejudiced organizations know that we are different, this love will make us different. We will grow as a church, as individuals, as children of God. May it be so. Amen and Amen.

