

Sixth Easter B

May 6, 2018

Church of the Advent

No Partiality

In spite of the rain this morning, in honor of this past week of absolutely gorgeous warm days, cool nights and East Carolina breezes carrying the smell of flowers and fresh mown grass, it would be easy enough to offer a languid, contemplative meditation on today's readings, another loving installment on the farewell address of Jesus, repeating once again that God is love, that we are loved—even as we are called friends—and of course, that we love one another. And yet we have a surprise gift to open this morning—a story behind the story—to wake us up, to challenge us, and to stretch our imaginations to consider what God might be up to.

Our first reading from The Acts of the Apostles is just the tail end of the story of Cornelius the Centurion, an important military commander in the Roman army, and a God-fearer—a devout believer in the One God who was the creator of the world and source of moral law. Cornelius worked for the Roman Empire, but he saw the world very differently than his fellow pagan Romans who worshiped many gods. Created by humans in the image of humans, and fashioned after those known to the Greeks and Persians, the gods of Rome behaved like people, and yet were endowed with divine powers to intervene in human endeavors. They were not particularly an inspiration to a moral life, often acting with intrigue, treachery, and adultery, for example. God-fearers like Cornelius rejected the idea that the many human-like gods of the Roman Empire could be examples for the way humans should be with one another; they believed in something bigger, higher, and more powerful—something *more*. These believers—who were *not* Jewish—rarely sought full inclusion into the Jewish community; that would have required circumcision and following all of the old rituals in the Law of Moses given to the Israelites. They *were* known to attend worship in Jewish synagogues, along with their families and households, but in the eyes of Jews, God-fearers were still gentiles—still outsiders who did *not* deserve to be members of God's household of chosen people.

Cornelius was as faithful in his belief as he knew how to be. Earlier in this story from the Book of Acts he is described as a good man who generously gave alms to the people, and who prayed constantly and devoutly to the One God. Then one afternoon Cornelius had a vision, where an angel of God blessed him for his prayers, and told him to send some of his men to Joppa to find a man called Simon Peter, who would be staying by the sea with a tanner also called Simon. And that is what Cornelius did—sent a trusted soldier who was also a believer, and two of his slaves to Joppa. It is important for us to see that Cornelius, an outsider, a gentile, was living a moral life in his own context, and praying to God, and was called by God to do something strange and new.

At the same time the men were traveling to Joppa on their mission for Cornelius to look for a man he had never met, for a reason he was yet to know, Peter was having his own vision in dream that included a conversation with God. Peter's dream was about being confronted with something outside his comfort zone. In the vision, Peter found himself hungry while being commanded to eat meat he would have understood to be unclean and therefore forbidden by the old Law of Moses—written rules for “the way they always did things” back then. The voice of God confronted Peter's resistance and said, *what God has made clean, you must not call profane*. After hearing this *three* times, and trying to wake up and collect himself, Peter heard an angel tell him to go and meet the men who had been sent by Cornelius to search for him. And so he did, and then went back with them to Caesarea to meet the man who had sent them. When they arrived they found the entire household of Cornelius and a crowd of his friends waiting for them. In front of everyone, Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and tried to worship him, but Peter pulled him up, and they began a heartfelt conversation about how God had brought them together. Then Peter made one of the most profound (and ignored) statements written in all Christendom: *I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*. Simon Peter—a Jew who had been an inner circle friend and follower of Jesus, was saying to Cornelius—a Roman Centurion, a gentile representative of the Roman occupation: If God accepts you then who am I not to? If God made you who you are and does something wonderful with your faithfulness, then who am I to shut you out of the community of believers? Who am I to assume you are unworthy of God's love and salvation?

What would the world look like if we truly believed that to be true—that God shows no partiality? What would the Christian church be like today? Who in the history of the Church might have been considered for welcome into the household of God, but instead was left on their own to follow their faith as best they knew how? There are about 2.2 billion Christians in the world today¹, about 32% of the world’s population. About 70% of Americans identify as Christian, though only about a third of those practice their faith through church attendance. There are estimates of over 30,000 different Christian denominations, with the number of different Christian congregations in the world estimated in the millions. There are 64 different Christian churches just in Martin County. On the one hand, from a consumer’s point of view, one might say that means there is something and some place for everyone. More likely, there are so many different churches because generations of Christians have spent great time, energy and resources splitting hairs and severing relationships over differing opinions and interpretations of what God’s desires for us might be, or what we believe is *right and acceptable* to God—or to be honest—*right and acceptable to us*. The result is that we have divided and segregated ourselves into congregations of like-mindedness, where we foremost seek comfort as we worship God with people like us, just as we believe God intended us to. That is not disparage all the good that comes from church, and perhaps God is pleased that so many houses of worship have been built and maintained to God’s glory. But should we not wonder—from time to time—how our human propensity to self-identify, self-isolate and self-sustain can color our perception of a greater truth—that *God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*.

This past Thursday I was invited to attend and participate in the local service to mark the National Day of Prayer. The theme for this year was *Unity*—in family, workplace, community, nation *and* the Christian Church. On a lovely day a group of about 50 people came together to sing and to listen to prayers offered by a diverse group of Christian clergy from Williamston. I was surprised to be moved by it, because I usually balk at the hypocrisy in public attempts to extol Christian beliefs and principles as foundational in political spheres that I don’t perceive to be particularly guided by the teachings of Jesus. But Thursday I found myself standing in the sunshine in Barnes Plaza, listening to the beautiful and carefully written prayers and thinking,

¹ Pew Research

what if? If God shows no partiality, what would it mean for *me* to show no partiality? What if I *could* try to love each and every person without pre-judgment, without fear of their world view encroaching upon mine? What if I *could* see Christ in everyone? How could that change things? How could that change the Body of Christ? How could that change me? What is the cost of being hungry and resisting being fed because we have always been taught that what we are offered is unclean?

The importance of this story about Peter and Cornelius from the early Christian Church is as real today as it was when Luke wrote it down. Peter listened to his better angel, and went to the house of Cornelius, finding an unexpected opportunity to preach and to baptize, inviting the whole household of this uncircumcised, gentile God-fearer, by water and the Spirit, into Christian community. In 1st John we heard today, *whatever is born of God conquers the world*. The differences that Peter and Cornelius brought into their relationship—one a Jew and the other a Roman officer—were insignificant next to the work God could do in each of their lives—as each moved beyond all that they were before, to following Jesus Christ wherever that was to be. Showing *no partiality* means being open to the ones God might be calling into our particular corner of the world—those who are like us, and those who are not. With God’s help, may we follow the example of Cornelius and Peter—strangers who became friends—and look always forward to what the Holy Spirit of God might be up when we least expect it. Amen.