

From Enemies to Friends in Christ
Acts 10: 44-48
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One of my favorite preachers is Bishop Karen Oliveto who serves in the Mountain Sky Conference of the United Methodist Church. She preached on Wednesday at the UMC General Conference, happening in Charlotte NC. This past week.

Bishop Oliveto gave a stirring sermon that I encourage you to seek out and listen to for the full context, in her sermon she said this powerful statement.

“One of our sins is that every single one of us has someone we don't see. Jesus doesn't allow our voluntary ignorances or our hardness of heart give us a pass on loving our neighbor, every neighbor, especially the ones we would rather overlook.

We can't be the church if we choose to overlook some members of the body of Christ. Whether a local church, whether an annual conference and let's just name it, even an entire denomination. If we define who we are by whom we are leaving out it begs the question have we ever let Christ in?”

Bishop Karen Oliveto. UMC General Conference 2024.

Let me read that last sentence again, “If we define who we are by whom we are leaving out it begs the question have we ever let Christ in?”

I was working on this sermon when I heard this statement from Bishop Oliveto and I felt it really sums up what Peter was facing in today's reading. But I think I need to set up the story more for you. At the very beginning of the church, the disciples were focusing their attention to their own people to

proclaim the Good News that Jesus was the Messiah and was resurrected from the dead. They remained focused on preaching to the people around them but it was not clear if this Gospel message was for everyone?

It was Peter's custom to pray every day and seek God's guidance. While praying, Peter has a vision of a large blanket descending to him on the rooftop. It was filled with animals that are forbidden for devout Jewish people to eat. Peter hears God say to him, "Rise up and eat." And Peter refuses. This happened three times. Each time Peter says no, and each time God responds saying, "Do not call unclean that which I have declared clean." Just then some people show up asking for Peter to come with them back to Cornelius' home in Caesarea. Cornelius was a Roman Centurian. Peter was hesitant but feeling that the dream he had and them showing up was both in God's plan so he and some others went with them.

When he gets to Cornelius' house, he finds all of Cornelius' household and relatives gathered. Peter knows that he is doing something unconventional and maybe even a bit dangerous. He realizes that by him following God's leading he could alienate some people from his one community. He realizes that everyone was taking great risks here. Not just to be shunned, but maybe even labeled a traitor, a spy or heretic. There were strict rules both within Judaism and within Roman law that would not look kindly on the mingling of these two groups.

He even says in verse 28. "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

After saying this, Peter stays and tells them all about Jesus and what this means that Jesus is raised from the dead, etc. Before he even finishes his

speech, Cornelius and others begin to speak in tongues and glorify God. A true sign to Peter and the others that God has saved them. Peter and the other believers couldn't believe it, but they also could not deny it either. Truly it was self-evident that God was with them and filled them with the Holy Spirit. Peter is so convinced by this sign of the Holy Spirit that he orders them to be baptized. He says, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (v 47)

This is so genuine and moving for Peter and the others that they stay for several more days. Peter sleeps in a Gentile's house, eats their food and spends time with them. There was no way of denying it. Peter had been living with a Gentile for several days. Just as we see the table of fellowship a true sign of acceptance and love so too, Peter and the others staying with Cornelius was another sign of acceptance by them.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was grilled about this. He had several people take issue with his behavior, but Peter, after recounting the whole story said, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17)

This story from the early church offers several insights into how God is at work in the world even still today.

1. God is at work in the world, and we are invited to be partners in that work. God was at work in Cornelius' life long before Peter came along.
2. Peter was spiritually attune to God's work. He was in prayer regularly and when the Spirit moved, he was able to discern that it was God at work and respond correctly.

3. Expect that when you follow God's leading you may upset others who cannot see God in the picture. It takes courage to follow God instead of the ways of the world.
4. It is about true equitable relationship with one another and God.
When Peter and the others saw the work of the Holy Spirit equal to how they experienced the Holy Spirit, they embraced them as equals in faith. Our common ground is Christ and nothing else.

When you read the book of Acts you find out that this issue of whether or not Jesus is for all people or only a select group was a persistent point of contention. It is a struggle that the church wrestles with each generation still today. Is the Gospel meant for ALL People or one for a select group of people? Are there varying degrees of salvation based on ethnicity, skin tone, gender or any other human construct?

As we see in this story with Peter, do we affirm the presence of God in the hearts of others and embrace them as kin or do we allow our own narrowmindedness keep us from recognizing Jesus in others?

Bishop Oliveto challenged the United Methodist church and all Christians with this very argument. It is an struggle that is part of our human condition that God seeks to redeem us from. "If we define who we are by whom we are leaving out, it begs the question have we ever let Christ in?"