

“Welcome the Outsider” – Acts 11:1-19 – May 19, 2019

Many of you know that I am a fan of Broadway musicals. I am also a fan of Star Trek. These two loves came together a few years ago when I discovered that actor George Takei, who played Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu on Star Trek, starred in a musical. On his Facebook page, Takei has shared his personal story. As a Japanese-American, Takei recalls his early childhood after the attack on Pearl Harbor living with his family in Japanese internment camps, including Rohwer War Relocation Camp in Arkansas. He has taken this experience and produced a musical called *Allegiance*. He wants to share his story and the story of so many Japanese-Americans who were labeled as being a threat to national security and forced from their homes to live in these camps. Our country was afraid that people of Japanese ancestry would harm the U.S., and so they were herded into groups where they could be watched. George understands what it means to be labeled as an outsider.

Human beings fear the unknown. We distrust what is different. When fear and distrust rule our actions, we create groups of us and them, placing a barrier between those who are in and those who are out.

I am sure there have been times in your lives when you have felt out of place or felt like an outsider. There are many factors that can define one's status as an insider or an outsider – the factors might include financial, social, political, racial, or gender. How we look, what we do, how smart we are, how we dress, who we love, how we vote, who we worship, where our ancestors originated. There are all sorts of factors that can lead to outsider status. Maybe you can think of times when you've been the outsider. Or friends or family members who have been so pegged? We can think of any number of examples of those things that keep people separate or at a distance from each other. The group the does the separating usually considers itself to be the in-group. Everyone else who doesn't have what it takes to belong is considered an outsider.

The book of Acts describes the formation of the early Christian church, and shows us the example of how the church is meant to be. Christianity very easily could have been an exclusive group. It started as an offshoot of Judaism. It was one of many factions that had come about due to the teachings of a specific charismatic and influential leader. The twelve disciples of Jesus had been Jews. Jesus himself was a Jew. And Judaism had some pretty specific requirements about who was in and who was out.

One of these determinants had to do with the following of the Jewish laws of purification. If a Jew were considered to be unclean, he or she was restricted from entering the Temple in Jerusalem and performing certain religious practices. Various contaminants could render a Jew impure, including having contact with a corpse, having certain skin diseases, sexual activity and a woman's menstruation. Being near others who were considered to be impure was also a big “no-no,” because the impurity could rub off on you causing you to be impure. Gentiles, or non-Jews, were considered to be impure, so Jews refrained from eating with them or entering their houses.

Another set of purity laws had to do with what a Jew could eat and not eat. Certain animals were considered to be unclean and were to be avoided as food. Pigs were definitely out, but many other animals, fish, and birds were also not to be eaten. Lists of these can be found in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Since the early followers of Christ were Jews it was natural for them to assume that the purity laws were still in effect, and that those people who were considered outsiders, namely the Gentiles, were not welcome in the church. But our scripture lesson from Acts tells us that God had a different plan. Our lesson from chapter 11 is actually a recap of the events that took place in Chapter 10.

Peter had been staying in Joppa with Simon the tanner. Simon would be considered unclean by Jewish standards, because as a tanner, he worked with the skins of dead animals. Definitely against the purity rules. And then later in that chapter, Peter had gone to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army and thus a gentile. Peter shared with Cornelius and his household the message of the gospel. Then he witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon these gentiles, and thus Peter baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ.

In our reading for today, the when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians had heard about what took place. They questioned Peter, wanting to know why he was associating with Gentiles. They still had an "us versus them" mentality. The Gentiles were outsiders, and they couldn't understand what possessed Peter to not only go visit with them but also eat meals with them. Then Peter explained to the Jewish believers what had happened to him. And this is where things get a little strange.

Peter shared with them that he had had a vision while he was praying. In this vision he saw something like a large sheet coming down from heaven. On the sheet, he could see all manner of animals, reptiles and birds. Then he heard a voice telling him to kill and eat. Peter adamantly refused on the basis of having never eaten anything unclean. He knew the law, and he wasn't about to break it. But the voice from heaven said to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Three times this occurred, and then Peter watched as the sheet was drawn back up into heaven.

And then immediately following this strange vision, three Gentile men came to the house in Joppa. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with the men to the house of Cornelius the centurion. The Spirit told Peter not to make any distinctions between Jews and gentiles. Peter then realized that the message of his vision was less about food being clean or unclean, but instead the message was that the gentiles were no longer to be classified as unclean. They were no longer to be seen as outsiders. Cornelius the centurion had also received a message from God. Cornelius was a devout and God-fearing man. An angel had come to his house and told him to go get Peter and to listen to what Peter had to say to him.

As Peter shared all this with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, he pointed out to them what seemed to be obvious. If these gentiles received the gift of the Holy Spirit, just like we did, who are we to question God? Even though it didn't make much sense to them, the fact that God chose to bestow salvation on this gentile household made a huge impact on the Jewish Christians. Who are we to get in God's way?

Now, this had been part of God's plan of salvation from the very beginning. Remember the promise that God had given to Abraham? That he would be the father of a great nation and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. And in the gospels, we are told that Jesus came to redeem the whole world.

For the early Christians this was a new and radical concept – to openly embrace gentiles into the church. We see this as a continued debate in the early church throughout the letters of the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writings. Imagine being a part of a community of faith where throughout your history you have remained separate from all others, and now all of a sudden, you're supposed to let those others, those outsiders, in.

Well, for us, the message we need to hear is - who is it that we consider to be outsiders? Who are we keeping at arm's length? Who is it that we consider to be unclean? From whom are we withholding God's love?

At some point in our lives we have all been guilty of living in an "us versus them" mentality. It certainly plagues our society and our institutions, including our churches. We see it daily in the headline news and witness its effect on our lives. Is there some kind of a litmus test we use to determine if someone is good enough or pure enough to be part of our group?

When we are out in the world, do we naturally gravitate toward some folks and find ourselves quietly pulling away from others? Do we shy away from some people or some situations because what we don't know frightens us? We all feel more comfortable when we're surrounded by people who are like we are and do the same things we do. The early Jewish Christians were not comfortable around gentiles. They ate unclean foods, they did strange things, they didn't follow the Jewish law. But if those early Jewish Christians had not followed the prompting of the Holy Spirit and had neglected to share the gospel with gentiles, we wouldn't be here. We're the gentiles, the outsiders.

In reality, there is no in group. There are just people. So maybe if we realize that we are all equal in God's eyes, we can learn to be more gracious and welcoming to the people we might normally tend to classify as unclean or unworthy. We Presbyterians emphasize God's grace. God's grace is much bigger than we can ever imagine. We're all just a bunch of random people looking for a place to belong. In God's kingdom all people are welcome. Instead of acting like God's bouncers in an attempt to keep some people out, let's take on the role of the welcoming committee and invite everyone in. There's plenty of room for all.