

A Wider Table
Acts 11:1-18
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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"Pastor, did you see those children taking communion?" they asked after worship one Sunday.

"Yes," said the pastor.

"Did you see how young they were?"

"Yes, I did," said the pastor.

"But they don't even understand what communion is all about."

"No. Neither do I really. I keep learning and understanding more all the time," responded the pastor.

"They looked like they were just having a snack in the middle of church."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful for children to understand God as one who gives them a special snack in the middle of church?" asked the pastor.

"But they aren't baptized."

"But they *are* part of our church family," the pastor said. "What if instead of passing the trays over their heads, we let them enjoy this special meal? And what if we keep learning and growing together?"

The conversation came up again. Perhaps it was a couple more times. But rather than put up a barrier to children participating, that congregation chose to welcome the children, to teach and learn alongside both them and their parents, to truly let communion be a table where all are welcome. And that decision didn't end up being only about the table. Rather that congregation grew in so many different ways as children came to lead and to participate more fully.

That congregation wasn't the first to wrestle with questions of belonging, of participation, of who is in and who is out.

In fact, really ever since people first organized themselves, we have been doing this, haven't we?

And we justify some of this. We can talk about the reasons why we group together with like-minded folk or with people who have similar experiences.

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But too often these conversations really just become cover for justifying the exclusion of people who are not like us.

So we are fortunate to have stories like the one we read today, stories where we watch the early church be confronted by the lines they have drawn and where we see them work through decisions about whether or not to widen the reach of the church.

In today's story it is Peter who has to confront this question. Peter, who is simply trying to do the right thing and who at first doesn't know how to envision the possibilities outside of his known rules and laws.

But the beautiful thing is that between this vision from God and his encounter with a Gentile named Cornelius, Peter is able to stop and to wonder. He is able to ask questions like:

- What would happen if the circle was drawn wider?
- What would happen if the barriers that keep people separated were removed?
- What would happen if I valued the people in front of me more than the rules I learned in my childhood?
- What would happen if listening to God led me to a wider table?

If you have read Acts then you know that a few chapters later Peter as well as Paul and his missionary companions gather with the leaders at Jerusalem to ask questions and to listen to stories and to make decisions about how they will move forward...these conversations come down to a pivotal question for those who follow Jesus - will the table be made wider even if it means giving up some of what we know?

Now here at First Christian we are part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination that grew out of the Stone-Campbell movement, a movement rooted in pushing back against exclusion, specifically exclusion from the communion table.

Our founders, having been part of a church where communion tokens were distributed to those with the "right" beliefs and the "right" behaviors, in other words - those deemed worthy...our founders pushed back against this practice. As people rooted in the idea of Christian unity and the belief that people could come together across many differences of understanding and experience, they worked to create an open table.

Yet, and this can be easy for us to forget especially at this time in our own history, still we have been on a journey of opening the table wider and wider, a journey of continuing to come to moments where we have to decide who will be welcomed and if anyone will be turned away. And this is not only a conversation about participating in communion - these days that feels like a given for many of us. But it is also a conversation about leadership and belonging and whether or not we can be fully in communion and community with people who are not like us.

Over the years we have seen this play out as conversations about the full participation of children and women, of queer people and people of color have been had. And, before we become critical of those we read about in the Bible who took a more limited view toward inclusion, we must learn to be honest about the times when we have had our own challenges.

We must learn to confess the ways our churches have limited the participation of black people even when black and white came together at the communion table.

We must learn to confess the ways we have slowed the participation of women in leadership even when we were happy for them to set the communion table and clean up after.

We must learn to confess the ways that we once prevented children from partaking in this sacred family meal all the while justifying our decisions.

We must learn to confess the ways that we have hurt our LGBTQ+ friends, serving them at the table even as we called their identity or their families sinful.

Gratefully, we here at First Christian can also point to a rich history of widening the table. We can point to these other moments as sins of our past, not things we still wrestle with. Meanwhile, we are challenged to learn not only from the early church but from our own stories, and to always be ready to hear a new word from God. Because the moment we confidently stake our claim in extravagant welcome, a situation will arise that will push us to live what we say we believe.

Peter knew all the rules. When he responded to the vision declaring that he would never eat such things he wasn't intending to be shortsighted or to cut anyone out. He simply knew the rules and had been taught that following them was important. It was only when he was willing to not stop there, but to be open a new conversation, a new idea, a moving of the borders that fenced in his faith...it was only then that he could really hear God's call and participate in God's expansive love.

Baptist Pastor Kristin Adkins Whitesides writes, "Our history as the Church is written down right there in the book of Acts, and it reminds us of how, from the very beginning, we have loved our rules. We have used them again and again to define who we are and who we aren't. Who is in and who is out.

"But from the very beginning, God has believed in the Church more than we have believed in ourselves. And so, God has constantly been challenging us to dream bigger. To imagine a world that is ruled not by the rule of law but by the law of love. And even in the midst of all the ways we have misread and misinterpreted and misapplied our rules, God just keeps working and moving in our midst. God keeps speaking to us again and again until hopefully, we are brave enough and wise enough to get the point" [Kristin Adkins Whitesides: Standing in the Way | Day 1](#)

We have done it in the past, but what if the next time and the time after that, we are brave enough to hear the heart of God, and again and again to widen the table?

What if instead of fear, we continue to learn to embrace the possibilities that lie in expanding the reach of love, even when at first we are unsure?

What if we claim a commitment to building bridges instead of barriers?

Friends, we see it in scripture and we have experienced it in our own lives...the church is better and more faithful when the reach is widened, when the table is open, when all of God's children are fully welcomed and deeply valued. May it always be so.