

Belonging III: God Shows No Partiality
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Acts 10: 1-36
April 29, 2018

We are in the middle of a sermon series on belonging. How do we find it? What needs to be in place so that we can offer it, receive it, trust that we have it? How can we be a church that stretches the circle of belonging?

In this series, we remain in conversation with Brene Brown and her book, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. Brown researches courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy.

In a chapter titled *High Lonesome: A Spiritual Crisis*, Brown quotes Bill Bishop's book *The Big Sort*. He says "we've geographically, politically, and even spiritually sorted ourselves into like-minded groups in which we silent dissent, grow more extreme in our thinking and consume only facts that support our beliefs. As a result we now live in a giant feedback loop, hearing our own thoughts about what's right bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read, the blogs we visit online, THE SERMONS WE HEAR (gasp), and the neighborhoods we live in.

Brown then says that "this sorting leads us to make assumptions about the people around us, which in turn fuels disconnection." As sorting happens, there's a hardening of the boundaries of the tribe. They become more like walls, less permeable. Brown also points out that at the same time that this kind of sorting is on the rise, loneliness is increasing too. Is it just a coincidence that when this kind of sorting is happening that fuels disconnection and suspicion that we, together, are feeling more intense loneliness. This sorting, this hardening of tribal boundaries, is an obstacle to belonging, to stretching the circle.

Thinking about this, I've been increasingly interested in the way the early church felt sent towards one particular tribal boundary: the boundary between Jew and Gentile. Not only did the church feel sent there, it broke through those hardened tribal boundaries. By the grace of God, it created belonging in a new way.

On Easter, I pointed out that in Matthew's resurrection story, the risen Jesus tells the disciples to go to Galilee, which means Galilee of the Gentiles. Go toward the Gentiles, that's where you will see the Risen Christ, that's where you will feel something sacred.

In the first sermon in this series on Ephesians 2, Abby said the question the early church was asking as Jews and Gentiles were coming together was, “*in this new religion, this new Body of Christ, could they all worship the God of Israel together? Was there room for everyone—including Gentiles—in the ancient and sacred covenant that God had made with Israel, the one that stretched back to Moses and Abraham and Noah?*”

Really, when you think about it, the early church was one big amazing act of creativity and inclusiveness. No one had ever tried to do what they were doing, these motley crews of Jews and Gentles scattered around, building beautiful and new dwelling places for God.

Our origin story includes a new kind of belonging being created at a tribal boundary, and we should pay attention to these stories and see what we can learn.

The story of Peter, a Jew, and Cornelius, a Gentile, is a story of two brave people behaving differently. It's also a story about God. My New Testament professor would say, “The Holy Spirit is the main character in Acts.” Our ancestors of faith are telling us that they felt sent, led, nudged towards this boundary. They are telling us that God leads, nudges, pulls us towards these tribal boundaries in whatever form they may take. Something sacred really wants us to be in relationship with one another.

Cornelius is a Centurion of the Italian Cohort. He is in charge of 100 Roman soldiers. He represents Rome, the occupying power. The enemy. But Cornelius is complicated. He is a God-fearer. This is the name for a non-Jewish seeker. Cornelius is hanging around the early church. Sitting in the back pew, becoming increasingly interested in what is going on, wondering if this faith and way of life have anything to offer. He isn't an official member but people know him. We are told he is devout, he prays a lot, he gives alms, he is giving to the poor. The faith is starting to shape his life in a self-giving way. He's being transformed.

So much so, that Cornelius' prayers and alms ascend to God like a memorial. This is language like that used for a sacrifice in the Hebrew scriptures. The ancients believed that you repair your relationship with God the way you repair relationships with human beings, with a gift and a meal. The transformation happening in Cornelius' life is like a gift to God that rises to the heavens. Holy Spirit decides “ooh, Cornelius is someone we can work with.” The Spirit sends a vision to Cornelius that has him send for Simon Peter.

The next day, Simon Peter is hungry and he goes up to pray. He has a vision of a tablecloth coming down with all the foods, those considered clean and those considered unclean. He is told to get up, kill, and eat. Peter says, “no.”

It is hard to overstate how big of a deal this is. If you abstain from certain foods: alcohol, meat, dairy, gluten, your whole lifestyle changes. The people you interact with often changes. Food and culture are interrelated. Then layer religious practice on top of it and centuries of tradition, and you have a lot at stake in this change. And yet, through all of these layers Simon Peter is still feeling pushed. The Spirit speaks: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Peter is puzzled by this and who wouldn't be. Peter is being asked to reconsider a fundamental practice. While he is trying to figure out the vision, the Spirit speaks to him and says, “three men are searching for you. Go with them without hesitation.” The three men take Peter back to Cornelius.

Peter's invited into a gathering with Cornelius's relatives and close friends. The room is packed with Gentiles. Peter, though, figures out the meaning of the vision. He says, “You know it is unlawful for a Jew to be associating with or visiting a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean.”

Do you hear the shift in what Peter says? Peter realizes the meaning of the vision is about more than food, the meaning is about people. Peter is willing to hold the cultural differences lightly, this is no small thing. To the extent that the strange practices of the people on the other side of the tribal boundary lead to suspicion, he is willing to put that aside to see if he can make a connection. He also realizes he can no longer call Gentiles names. Name calling isn't helpful. People are clean. People are valuable. People are beloved by the God of Israel. He cannot deny the humanity of Gentiles anymore. Also, the Gentiles are right in front of him, which makes the name calling much more difficult. Amazing how that happens.

The main character in this story, the Holy Spirit doesn't push Cornelius and Peter towards this boundary recklessly. A lot has to fit together for this new space for belonging to work. There are shared values that make this connection possible and safe. There is a shared value of staying open to the God of Israel in prayer; there is a shared value of alms, of giving to the most vulnerable. Some people call Cornelius righteous, which suggests that Cornelius is following the spirit of Torah. Cornelius is a good guy. He's different, but he's a good guy. These points of connection then provide a foundation for sorting the rest out.

Cornelius asks Peter to preach and he does. He starts with “God shows no partiality.” God’s love and grace are for all people, maybe ours should be too. At the end of the sermon, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles gathered, just as the Holy Spirit fell on the Jews who were gathered on the day of Pentecost at the beginning of the book of Acts. What is needed for any space for belonging has been created: valuing and honoring the other. The Gentiles have just as much worth. Now the messy process of creating this permeable boundary between these two tribes can begin.

In this chapter on High Lonesome, Brown asks, “Can we find our way back to ourselves and to each other, and still keep fighting for what we believe in? No and yes. No, not everyone will be able to do both, simply because some people will continue to believe that fighting for what they need means denying the humanity of others. That makes connecting outside our bunkers impossible. I do believe, however, that most of us can build connection across difference and fight for our beliefs if we’re willing to listen and lean in to vulnerability. Mercifully, it will take only a critical mass of people who believe in finding love and connection across difference to change everything.

Peter and Cornelius, nudged by the Holy Spirit, were two people who were willing to risk finding connection across difference, and through them, the Spirit created something new.

They speak to us across time, telling us that the Holy Spirit will be nudging the church to be that critical mass of people who believe in finding love and connection across difference. That’s where we will see the Risen Christ creating new spaces for belonging. Amen.