

STORY John 17:21 (The Voice translation)

Abba, may they all be one as You are in Me and I am in You; may they be in Us, for by this unity the world will believe that You sent Me.

SCRIPTURE READING Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ So, he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

SERMON “The Beloved Community: United and Uniting” (The Reverend Brent Damrow)

By the time we catch up with Peter in this week’s reading, you couldn’t blame him if there were a bounce in his step. He had to be so pleased with how things were going in his community, this new, beloved community that was taking shape before his very eyes, that group that was blossoming into what we know as Church.

You couldn’t blame him if he felt a great sense of hope and optimism, for barriers were falling, connections were being made, life was found, and the numbers, Acts reminds us, the numbers of those baptized, the numbers of those giving their hearts over to this way of life, with every passage, with every story, those numbers seemed to just be growing.

We couldn’t blame him if he looked at his flock and even felt a bit of satisfaction at who they were, and how they got there, to the story that Hal just read this morning.

Do you remember the story we’ve been encountering? I bet Peter couldn’t forget. How could he? He’d remember. We’ve been following Peter’s story and this beloved community now five weeks: after Easter, after the Resurrection, after Jesus told all who believed—which, by the way, at that time was a very small number, 120 people—after Jesus told them to wait for the Spirit, pray and eat and sing, and just be together and see where that Spirit takes them.

And they did, and do you remember? That first week after Easter, they became a community that cared and shared. Do you remember the Bible tells us they shared everything?” And while I think we so quickly go to sharing things like resources and finances, I think more true to the story, they shared their hearts, they shared their prayers, they shared the big moments of their lives, they shared the fullness of their identity, and yes, those resources too, until, you remember, there wasn’t anyone in need among them for anything. And it was good.

And then do you remember that next week, Peter, the one who was so terrified the night Jesus was arrested, how he became bold, and he proclaimed the truth about who Jesus was and why he mattered? Not just to the insiders, not just to the believers, not just to the ones who were following, but in the public square in the middle of the day, to people who were walking by on the street.

He could have been angry; he could have judged the people for what had happened to Jesus. But he didn't. Do you remember, instead he invited them along for the ride? He invited them to repent. Do you remember that beautiful phrase, "that the goodness of Christ might be sent directly to them"? It was good.

Do you remember then the next week, in front of the Who's Who of the Crème-de-la-Crème of Jerusalem, Peter remembered who his cornerstone was? Remember, he said, "Jesus is my cornerstone," and from that cornerstone everything is built out and up and over and around. And that was good.

And then last week. Do you remember how Peter was sent out on a road in the middle of nowhere and found a person from a far-off land who needed exactly what Peter had to give? That person, you remember, the official that Pastor Terry told us last week was presented in beautiful diversity—and all the complexity—in one human being, found amazement in this theory of this life, yet had no context in which to understand it. And suddenly Peter was there, to make it all come to life. And that official said, "Baptize me, won't you?" It was the official who said to Peter, "What is to prevent you from baptizing me?" Because you see, the official saw a barrier. And the answer came, "Absolutely nothing."

The question at stake, though, is: "What is to keep me, the outsider, from becoming the insider? What is it, more to the point, what is to keep you and me from becoming an us?"

The passage that we used from Kids Time, from John, that is on my stole, reminds us that it is God's yearning—and Christ's prayer—that we might all be one, just as they are one. Not obliterating difference, but instead understanding distinctiveness and welcoming it into one unified whole. So, if there is a barrier of any kind in our faith, in our religion, in our world, here's what I think: that barrier is of our making, not of God's.

This past year we have learned so much about barriers, haven't we? Even how they can be so helpful in some situations: we have learned about barriers of cloth, like these facemasks; barriers of distance; we have learned about barriers like family units and "pods," those whom we choose to welcome into our family, just like we do here, one big pod.

We have learned how barriers and structures can keep us safe. Over the last two days, I have seen billboards that remind us that the pandemic is still here: we need to keep up those barriers. Those barriers are tools of love and safety, and yet we know the danger of barriers becoming calcified. We know that even barriers undertaken in the form of health and love can protect us in some ways, but lead to other risks: depression, loneliness, isolation.

As we're trying to open back up to become the beloved community in new ways, it is a real and profound challenge to know how we transition. For we know this: building that wall last year didn't take long: there were rules, the doors shut, we streamed. We all knew what the rules were. And yet whenever we take down a wall, it is a much more involved and engaged process. My spiritual director and coach tells me she imagines it will take a full year for us to find our way back into a new beginning.

In our story that Hal read today, we see even more barriers falling. Remember the question that was asked from the official last week, that challenge to Peter: "What is it that keeps you from baptizing me?" Suddenly now, one short week later, it is Peter who has picked up that question, not only challenging the people of his time, but ordering that baptism happen.

The story before this perceived barrier set the stage for what we hear this morning. It is a story that involves a man named Cornelius and his family, the very one whom the Spirit falls on today. What brought Peter together with them is another of those trips Peter takes. The Spirit simply said, “Get up and go!” It was a trip that sent Peter physically beyond his community and spiritually beyond his comfort zone. And this time you’ll notice, Peter brought some faithful folk with him, folks who on the outside—*read* circumcision, and in their life practices—fit the markers of those who are in, in just the way those stars on the Snitches did.

But again, Peter in this case was not sent to someone who was already in, at least not by human wisdom, but rather to Cornelius, a Gentile, someone that Peter was not supposed to be hanging out with. Peter in fact, in the story said so: “I am not supposed to be with you.” Peter, who watched all these barriers fall, was suddenly, like, “Wait. No, barrier: can’t do this. Not here.”

Even though Cornelius was a believer, the Bible tells us that Peter still said, “Nope, you’re a Gentile. Can’t hang out with you.”

Peter saw a barrier, while the Spirit saw possibility. Both Peter and Cornelius followed paths laid out by the Spirit until those paths collided and everything changed. And upon their meeting, more barriers fell for Peter, and he discovered—and finally understood--our human tendency to see distinctions, while God instead sees connection. Our human tendency to build walls rather than bridges while the Spirit does what it does. The Spirit descended, it enlivened, it caused change again.

And I wonder if now, finally, on the fifth try, it was enough because Peter had seen this play out before. Instead of questioning, he goes with it. It seems so natural, that question of faith, so clear, that he answers his own question and says, “Let’s do some baptisms right here.”

And why does it seem so natural to Peter? The Bible wants us to remember that this is something radical, that those faithful believers that Peter brought with him, they were flabbergasted. They were astounded. They were, like, “What are you doing?”

But they too didn’t get in the way. They watched; they wanted to stay with this new family. Did you hear what Hal read? After baptism, Cornelius said, “You stay with us.” And they stayed, not just for lunch or brunch, not just for dinner. They stayed for days, for they were now a pod, this new family.

Friends, as we prepare to regather as a church, we have every reason to have a bounce in our step. Despite all the obstacles of this pandemic, we’ve allowed the Spirit to blow in our midst, haven’t we? We’ve sent out; we’ve welcomed in.

As we prepare for the Annual Meeting in just two weeks, I know sometimes you probably don’t read that Annual Report; I’m not going to ask you to show your hands. But if there were ever a year to read it, *read it*. It is nothing short of spectacular what the people of this church have done, how much we have reached out and in, feeding, worshipping, learning, serving, learning, sharing, caring. When you read it, linger in it. You’ll be amazed at the Spirit behind it.

We should have a bounce in our step. And yet, this year that is now finally almost behind us, maybe we can find something to learn in it about our own assumptions or boundaries that we still see, which keeps others from coming here. Or maybe more to the Biblical point that we’ve just read over and over with Peter, “What’s giving way in our going out with open hearts to be

changed in the encounters that the Spirit leads us to? What is still getting in our way from becoming one, going from being a *United Church of Christ*, to becoming a *Uniting* one; going from a welcome being our identity, to becoming our vocation.

For what Peter learned in Acts, is what many churches in the UCC have learned too: that when you learn about barriers, you are better able to see other barriers that you might never have noticed. When you confront one barrier, it leads you to wonder, “What is the next one that deserves confronting?” And to find the courage and hope to tackle it too.

Here’s what we know: in the United Church of Christ, churches that become racial justice churches, they may have set out for one reason, but they often find expanding definitions and realities of what those two words ‘Race’ and ‘Justice’ really mean. Churches like us that have become open and affirming find others beyond the Queer community that have not been fully affirmed and welcome them in to see what they can learn from them. Churches that become green congregations find the calling of care to extend throughout all creation.

If we find the courage to gather back together, not just for the joy of seeing each other, those we already know, but for the astounding joy of finding new people to welcome into shared life, I hope we also find the courage to let them to welcome us into their life, to take their invitation to stay with them for a while and see what we can learn.

Yesterday, I had the joy of attending the Southern New England Conference Annual Meeting. To be honest, I did it completely out of obligation. I was not looking forward to staring at a computer screen for hours on end. You need to know I’ve been nominated to serve on the leadership, on the Board of Directors, for this newly formed conference, and after much prayerful discernment I decided to respond to that call and say “Yes.”

I went to the meeting because I was told to, because I had to, but what I need to tell you is what I found. I love this church: you know that I do. I love what we do so well, and I love the people that make it happen. And yet, what I found yesterday were so many different forms of expression, of church being shared. I found churches of a radical inclusivity, beyond welcome, of searching out and calling in. I found churches of music which shakes the rafters and stirs up the body. I found churches engaged in causes of justice, even if it means 15 people in a congregation taking on a Fortune 500 company—and, by the way, winning.

Churches facing budget deficits where they don’t know if they are going to be open tomorrow, and yet extending grants to people who need it. Churches doing things that might make many of us—including me—quite nervous about exactly how it fits in, and how it would look, and how it would feel. Churches not exactly like us. And then it hit me: yes, we are called to be our own unique church here in the Berkshires, responding to the needs of this place, and yet I sometimes wonder, even in our extravagant welcome, what boundaries we have either built or fail to see anymore. I wonder what boundaries we have built that we think serve our purposes, but though we know that boundaries don’t serve God’s.

I wonder what barriers we built that stop us from our vocation of unifying the reality that we are called to be the Risen Body of Christ. Christ prayed that our body, this body here, down the street at St. Paul’s, and across the world, might be made one, just as he was with God, unique yet together, distinct yet whole.

Friends, I want you to feel good this day, and there is reason for hope and bounce in your step. But not just because things are going well or opening back up. But instead because the Spirit is here. And because the Spirit sends us, this Body of Christ, out so that we might serve and be changed. That we might welcome and discover the boundaries that still separate. That we might, as a beloved community, be recreated, reborn, not in our own image, but in the very image of God, in which we all, insiders and outsiders, believers and skeptics, saints and sinners, each have likewise been created.

And you know what? It is so easy! All we need to do, like Peter, is simply let the Spirit get us moving, and see where it takes us, the living, knowing, Christ—one who is raised, and goes before and with us.

Friends, what are we waiting for? Let's do it! Amen?