

**As Wide as God's Welcome (Acts 11:1-18)**  
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**The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Psalm 148; John 13:31-35; Revelation 21:1-6)**  
**May 15, 2022**  
**WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/as-wide-as-gods-welcome](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/as-wide-as-gods-welcome)**

The Book of Acts is the New Testament book that follows the story of the believers after the resurrected Jesus departs and leaves the movement in their hands. The camera's focus begins with the original disciples and Simon Peter steps up into the spotlight on the day of Pentecost. Then different ones shine. The apostles replace Judas and there's the first of many martyrs as Stephen is stoned. Then Saul the terrorist is converted from his blind obedience to the Jewish priests and joins the movement of people of the Way.

The gospel goes from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Acts tells us of the geographical barriers of deserts and seas as well as the racial and religious barriers. The chief issue for the emerging church dealt with the evangelization of the Gentiles who were uncircumcised and did not follow the ritual regulations of the Jewish faith. They were "the unwashed" and the Jews challenged them with Jewish exclusions and questioned whether they could be accepted.

The canopy for today's story spans Acts 10 & 11 when Peter was summoned to Joppa because of Dorcas' death. While still in Joppa, he had a strange dream that altered everything he had been taught to believe.

Peter's dream predates the first theological debate in the church: What do we do with the Gentile converts? Acts 15 is the story of that debate and it was a major conflicting battle over the Scriptures, (who's in and who's out?) but it's also about the relationship between God and the Scriptures, about the limits or the freedom of God's love and embrace.

Up until this point, the mission of Jesus and his disciples was directed at the people of Israel. Yes, a few notable outsiders received God's care. But they were the exception, and they never became part of the community formed in Jesus' name. Peter expanded the terms of belonging. The dream gave him the spiritual authority to welcome non-Jewish believers, to draw the lines of inclusion differently. Because of Peter's vision, a God-fearing gentile could be welcomed with open arms.

The church has been asking questions about identity ever since. What do you need to do to be part of Jesus' community? What rituals do you need to participate in? What earnestness in worship, and what generosity in giving? What hoops do we ask people to jump through?

Less churchy questions, too: What sexual behavior is acceptable? What attitude toward racism, political views or science are welcomed?

At the root is the issue of authority. How do we decide? Scripture? Tradition? Based on whose interpretation? Traditional authority was upended in Peter's vision, though he's hardly the first person to challenge the status quo because of something God told him in a dream. It's hard to argue with "God told me this." Harder still to form a community among those who each claim God told them something different.

What's the proper relationship between one person's experience and the time-honored foundations of church doctrine? At one extreme stands a rigid, well-defined rationale for inclusion and exclusion, as practiced by Baptists and other Christian churches of an earlier era. Those churches typically practiced closed communion and preached against divorce and drinking and interracial marriages and a whole assortment of other rigid social rules. We've always had the rules and regs that defined the church and those rules have kept some out.

Churches that draw the wrong lines need the big erasers of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. But what about churches that draw no lines? I give us a lot of grace. We are trying to get love right. We should strive to recognize that love supersedes our rules and regs.

I wonder what the guardrails of faith should be, knowing full well the diversity of faith represented even in our small congregation means very few of us believe the same things, though we are united by our words. We do say, "This is God's table. All are welcome here!" I say it every time I invite people to communion.

I err on the side of inclusion—but I wonder if our open arms are unwittingly causing spiritual harm. Is it faithful to take away all boundaries?

We will always wrestle with these questions, because we will always encounter and love people who don't fit into our boxes. As a pastor, I take great comfort in knowing that questions of identity and belonging are as old as the church.

It gives me even more comfort to know the question isn't actually ours to answer. The heart of Christianity is never what we do; it is what God does. The community of God's people doesn't spring up from our activity; it comes from God. Peter's vision was, after all, from God and not of his own making. As long as we err on the side of love and stay open to the Holy Spirit's guidance, we follow the commandment Jesus gave the community formed in his name: to love one another so people will know we are Christ's disciples.

Back in the early days of black and white TV, when televisions were small and you had to get up to turn a knob from station to station or adjust the rabbit ears to get a clear picture, there was a comedy duo named, "Burns and Allen," made up of George Burns and Gracie Allen. George was smart and all-knowing and confidently smoked a cigar while onstage with Gracie. Gracie was sweet and innocent but was portrayed as a bit of a dimwit. Both were deftly acting out characters formed from years and years on the stage. And yet, just below the surface of Gracie's dimwitted character, Gracie possessed a profound and simple wisdom.

Gracie Allen died decades before her husband and the story goes that after her death, George was sorting through her papers and on top of everything in her desk, he found an envelope addressed to him. When he opened it, the note inside read, "George, never place a period where God places a comma."

That line about commas and periods are typical ways we view life. We put down periods as though life was neatly segmented and unchanging but we seldom recognize the hopefulness of commas that allow for the role of mystery and grace.

Living faith is at least as much mystery as it is certainty. Faith is living in the questions allowing God to put either a period or a comma as God wishes. The role of faith is to trust God enough to let God decide where to put the comma and where to put the period.

Ann Lamott once wrote, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do."

What if we turned our attention to seeing all the people God loves and not feel we have to call balls and strikes on everyone around us? What if we could determine we would be a church that opens its arms up as wide as God opens up the arms of love for others? What we learn is that we are stewards of God's love, not gatekeepers.

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