

**Sermon Even the Gentiles Welcoming All Acts 10:44-48 May 17, 2009 Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO**

**Let me ask several questions as a prelude:**

**Does a family have to welcome all of the members in the family? NO. We all can remember and recognize that in some families people are not welcomed, in fact they are ostracized for who they are, who they married, their work, attitudes, sexual orientation, beliefs.**

**Does a church have to welcome all people who come and want to be members? No. We can point to history where those whose skin was a different color were not welcome, during wartime when people of Native American, Asian, or Middle Eastern heritage were asked to leave a church. Today people are discriminated because of their...you fill in the blanks....**

**Does Christianity welcome all: Yes, and NO. Yes, if one tries to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus. NO, if one understands that which makes one a Christian is one's creed, or what the church itself believes. Exclusion does happen.**

**I affirm that the church welcomes all, no matter what! I do not see the church as a family. Nor do I see it as a community, an organization, or an institution. I see it as a.....I don't know what it is.**

**The cover on the bulletin was decided over a week ago. As I looked at it I recoiled, because it depicts a "traditional Caucasian family of mom, pop, son and daughter...the only thing missing is the cat or dog and a station wagon, or SUV. Today's family is not composed of what we might have experienced or idealized. Today there are "single" families, people who are widowed or single by choice or circumstance, with no siblings, children, relatives; there are single parent families, a woman or man raising a daughter or son. The traditional image of the family no longer exists.**

**Today, I am aware that I am living in a world that is more polarized than when I was growing up. Then we had black and white, Russians and United States, those who were Red Sox fans and those who were New York Yankee devotees. Today I am aware of the polarity between Republicans and Democrats, fundamentalists and progressives, rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots.**

**I am aware of sisters and brothers of every faith and of those who have none, who are trying to live into the call of the holy. In Islam, in Judaism, in Hinduism, in Buddhism as well as in Christianity there are lines being drawn in the sand, not only between people of different faiths, but also between "traditionalists" and "reformers." Modes of dress, choice of food, times of prayer set us apart from each other, sometimes making us visible to those who consider us a threat merely because we belong to a different group.**

**In the scripture this morning, we need to understand what is taken place: Peter meets Cornelius Roman soldier of rank, prestige, and honor. He's wealthy, owns slaves, and may have gained all he had through pillage and plunder. He would've been, to the faithful and observant Jew, which includes Simon Peter, a person of derision, maybe disgust, and probably hatred for participating in the oppression of Israel and the economic exploitation of the people so as to provide for the**

glories of Rome. So, Peter will be quite surprised when God makes it clear that Cornelius is loved by God, too, and there is nothing that Peter can do about it.

Shortly before God arranges an introduction of Peter to Cornelius, God gives the well-meaning-yet-often-befuddled Peter a vision of a four-cornered sheet full of animals that would make Peter unclean if he even touched them, much less ate them. Peter may not follow the rules, but he certainly knows them. “Kill, and eat,” a voice says to Peter.

Peter replies, even though he is famished, “I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice says: What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times.

Then the clean Peter meets the unclean Cornelius. God has made Cornelius too, and it is not for Peter to call him profane. With God, the lost are just as much God’s as the holy, righteous, the found. We are not to wait around for people to come to us, but we are to go to the people, to the lost, to the lonely...for remember the words of Jesus: I was sent not to the righteous, but to the lost, lonely afraid, to bring good news of God’s love for all people...not just for a few!.” (My translation and understanding).

Peter begins a sermon with these words: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” It is during this sermon that the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word, and the circumcised believers were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. “Even on the Gentiles.”

Oh my God! My bet is that it was a nano second after “astonishment” that “shocked” entered in, followed by “incensed.” Who do these Gentiles think they are? I’ll bet that there were quite a few grumbles, and perhaps some people might have left that group, fellowship, community, family, and gathering.

But Peter, who is slowly getting it, says, “Wow, since the Spirit is already blessing these people powerfully, how can we withhold our welcome and fellowship from them?”

People (members and friends) of Salem United Church of Christ, we stand on the edge today. Fear is ramping up everywhere...False Emotion Appearing Real. Fundamentalists of every religious, political, social and economic strip are urging us to choose self-protection over love. We are not immune of they we versus they thinking and rhetoric of fear. We are encouraged to retreat to the safety of rigid separation form the Gentiles, and Gentiles being anyone and every one who is “not us.”

Last Friday evening I attended a gathering where Wm Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, spoke. He shared how the book came to be: it was intended to be a 3-4 page manuscript for his sons and daughters and grandchildren. They made copies of it and mailed it to others, who mailed it on, who mailed it on. Eventually and by a circuitous route it was published and over 2 million copies have been sold. Paul Young is an older gentleman, who was working three jobs at the time of the writing. He is like you and me. Struggling with issues, with questions about the state of the world, relationships, evil, his past, God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, economics and more. (The presentation is archived at [www.abidinghopelutheran.org](http://www.abidinghopelutheran.org) and the password is Papa.)

**The essence of the book and of the scriptures this morning is “what might happen if I, if we stopped anticipating where the Spirit was at work? Or even if we were the only one who could decide where the Spirit was allowed to work? What might happen if I just paid attention, if I looked and listened without making judgments about the people who are being entrusted with the Word, or in stories that sound risky and strange? What might happen if I lived in the present, not the past or the future, but NOW. What might happen if I trusted God to sort it out instead of wanting to control it myself?**

**Is it possible that God is still speaking; God is still acting in ways that could make me feel uncomfortable, that challenge me and my thinking, my attitudes, my relationships?**

**That is what happened with Peter! That is the story of “The Shack” in which God uses all available paths to seek us out to bring us to that place where we trust and are at peace with the greatest lover of all.**

**So, what if we, as a community, as a family, as a people did the same. What would happen if we believed that God is working here, slowly, bringing us to the place of LOVE and PEACE, without our interference of what we think.**

**Amen.**

**(Thanks to Rev. Andrea Anastos for suggestions and ideas in this sermon)**