

No Outsiders, No Boundaries—Fifth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 11:1-18](#)

[Psalm 148](#)

[John 13:31-35](#)

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Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

I have to tell you, this week has been a full week for me! Zoom meetings about the future of our congregation; hospital visits; an overnight conference in New Hampshire—with deep discussions about partnerships between the Episcopal Church in New England and our own Lutheran church here, too; another in a series of wonderful classes on Lutheranism, here in the sanctuary, and on Zoom and on Facebook Live, too; and then on Saturday, up in Worcester, I and the Forward Leadership Team from our congregation continued our work of learning, growing, and discovering who we are as a community and how best to venture into the days ahead. Phew!

But in all the busy-ness, I feel so blessed, I feel so humbled. I feel just like Peter in our lesson from the Book of Acts.

In Acts, Peter is having to give an account of his busy days, too. Already, the earliest gathering of Jesus' followers has made divisions: of insiders and outsiders. These folks in Judea think the only people that Peter should be talking to are those who follow the ways of their Judean ancestors, those who behave, and look just like them—not these “gentile” outsiders, who don't know the sacred traditions. But “step by step,” Acts says, Peter tells them: How God showed him to cross boundaries, to meet new folks, to share with all of them the message that “they and their entire household will be saved.”

God in a vision declares to Peter a truth—the truth that God also made clear in Jesus' birth, in Jesus' death, and in Jesus' Resurrection as well. The Holy Spirit says to Peter: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This means there are no outsiders. All belong, all of creation God has made good and holy. God has chosen what is flesh, what is here and physical, God has glorified Christ by it, on the cross, John's Gospel says today, to show all people the truth of God's love.

And this week, as I have been meeting on Zoom and zooming around New England, the Holy Spirit has made this truth really sink in for me too. **There are no outsiders.** With the Episcopalians, we talked deeply of how alike we are: How both our churches officially declared

in 2001 that we share our sacraments and our priests and pastors in common. Now, 20 years later, we tease out what this means, as Lutheran and Episcopal congregations cross boundaries, even merge and come together as one. And like us and Grace & St. Peter's Episcopal down the road, we worship and work together to declare God's truth: The Holy Spirit falls upon all people, just as it fell upon the earliest believers.

There are no boundaries... And there are no outsiders **here** in our community either, we are seeing. As we have been learning about the roots and the essence of what it means to be Lutheran in our Thursday night classes, I see we are also learning more about the diversity of all our backgrounds, and the unique strengths **and the unique wounds**, we all bring to bear here. Some are coming from the Methodist tradition, or the Episcopal or the Roman Catholic, or from the Baptist and Reform traditions as well. This is a very diverse community we are beginning to foster here. A brave community of conversation and sharing. And as Daniel Erlander, the author of the book we are learning from on Thursdays, rightly says: All together, we represent the one, holy, catholic church (with a lower case "c").

We are a denominationally diverse community that, nevertheless, is coming together. Coming together to see and experience God in the waters of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Table. Coming together to tell our own stories, too, of seeing and experiencing God in our own lives.

And up in Worcester yesterday, we were telling some of these stories. The facilitators of the Forward Leadership Community have begun to ask us, "Why?" Why do we do what we do as a church? Can we easily answer that question: Why are we here? And some of the answers that Leo and Cyndi began to give—and some other answers to that same question I've heard you all articulate in Thursday Devotions and Sunday morning learning times—they are very deep. They are very real.

The answer to the question of "why" are we church, why are we here—it's not about the worship we hold, the services we render for Hamden, the stuff we do, however, good—the "whys" I've heard have to do with the strong feeling that God is here.

We do what we do, we come here to this community because we believe God meets us here—the Holy Spirit has fallen upon us. We do what we do, we come here to this community, also, because, like Peter says, "If then God gave [these others] the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Here, we do not hinder God, which means: We welcome all people. We learn from Scripture, we puzzle out our Tradition, so that we can extend a genuine welcome to all kinds of people. To extend to them the same nurturing family that we experienced. To extend to them, truly, the nurturing unconditional love of God...

And, in other words, to do as Jesus commands in John's Gospel: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

It has been a very full week. And I'm full of joy about it. I feel like our Psalm this morning. A Psalm full of many songs. Not just songs from Methodist, Episcopal and Roman Catholic songs... but songs of the moon, of stars, of sea monsters and deeps, songs of creeping things, songs of fruit trees and cedars, and songs, too, of sovereigns of the earth and all peoples, old and young together.

And the song we all sing, creatures and rocks and peoples is this: There are no outsiders. All belong, all of the universe God has made good and holy. God has chosen what is flesh, what is physical, in Christ, to show all creation the truth of God's love.

Amen.