

**Sunday, May 9, 2021**

**Sermon: Jesus Choses Everyone: Why the  
Early Church Was a Progressive Movement**

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*This morning we will celebrate the new commandment that Jesus gives us on John 15:9-17, that the only thing that matters is that we love one another. We will explore this message in light of the story of radical inclusion in Acts 10. Who is included? Everyone.*

If I were to ask you what was the first major controversy in Christian history, how would you answer that question? If I were to ask you what was the first major controversy that split the early church, how would you answer that question? You might answer it by saying that it must have been something about Jesus, like his divinity and his humanity, and that must have been the first controversy in Christian history. Or you might say that it must have been something about the trinity and that was the first major controversy for the early church. Or maybe it was about the Bible, about scripture, like what books should be in the Bible, and what should not be in the Bible. That surely must have been a major controversy for the early church. No, it wasn't any of those kinds of questions. The biggest controversy of the early church, the one controversy that split the early church at the very beginning, was not based on the nature of Jesus being divine or human. It was not based on debates about the Trinity. It was not based on how many books and what books should be in the Bible. The biggest controversy at the very beginning was who gets to be included into this group. The biggest controversy right at the beginning was based on who is included and who is excluded and it split the early church.

The reason I am bringing this up is because our reading today comes from the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts shows this controversy. Do you know who wins the day of this controversy? Those who fought for radical inclusion won the day. The early church from the very beginning had a message that was based on radical inclusion. This was a radically progressive message. Just like Jesus struggled against many of the principles within his religious tradition that created an "us" against "them" mentality in order for us to see there is no "us" and "them," there is only "us."

The early church moved in this direction, too. Throughout the Book of Acts, we read about it, but we see it in Acts, Chapter 10 from our reading today. Peter has a vision when he's on top of a roof of a sheet that comes down from Heaven. On that sheet are all kinds of animals that the law, his religious laws, said were unclean and that he shouldn't touch. And that he certainly shouldn't eat. Then he hears the voice of God say to him, "Peter, take and eat." And Peter says, "Surely not Lord, I have never touched those unclean filthy animals and I'm not gonna do it now." Then he hears the voice of God say again, "Take and eat," and Peter says, "No." And then he hears it again and Peter finally gets the message. For Peter, you may remember that it generally takes three times for him to get the message, just like Peter denied Jesus three times as Jesus was going to the cross. Jesus comes back to Peter in the resurrection and says to him three times, "Peter, feed my sheep."

Here, the voice of God comes to Peter and says three times to eat these animals. Why does that matter? That matters because the law told Peter that he wasn't allowed to eat these animals. Peter says that he can't eat these animals or touch them because the law says that they are unclean, and if I touch them they're going to make me unclean. So God says to Peter, "What I have made clean do not call unclean."

What I want you to notice is this progressive move in scriptures, this move that many of the laws come to us and say what you can do, what you can't do, who's included, and who's excluded. These laws are vanishing, washing away. Why? Because God tells him that what I have made clean, do not call unclean. Peter realizes that this vision is not about animals. He realizes that this vision is about human beings. After this vision, Peter is taken to a gentile's house. Now, we 21st century Christians don't typically understand what it means to be a gentile in the first century world, because in Peter's understanding, there are Jewish people and there are gentile people and the two don't really mix. If you are Jewish, that's awesome. If you're gentile, you're not really part of the people of God. This is all based on this ancient practice of circumcision. So, there's a law in Genesis Chapter 17 where God comes to Abraham and says that if anybody wants to be part of your community they must be circumcised. That is a law where they have to change their bodies in order to become of the people of God. Here Peter says and understands that that law is no longer valid. You cannot look back to religious laws in order to define who is included and who is excluded anymore. Why? Because that's all part of the clean and unclean, pure and impure systems that we find throughout all religions.

And the religion of Christianity might not be a religion at all. It might be the anti-religion. It might be the thing that leads us beyond religion because if religion is based on who is included and who is excluded, who is good and who is bad, who is pure and who is impure, then Jesus has nothing to do with that. Jesus leads us beyond those distinctions that we make of us against them so that we see that there is only us. That's the vision that Peter sees. That's the vision that Jesus gives in his life.

You see the teaching today from John Chapter 15 where Jesus says, "I have made known to you everything that I heard from my father." Jesus makes known to us everything that he has heard from the father, from God. And what is it that Jesus has heard from God? Love. Love one another.

Notice how Jesus doesn't say that I've made known to you everything from the laws that might lead us to divide the world up into good guys and bad guys, the laws that say yeah, in in these situations you can stone people, you can kill people. In these situations, Jesus doesn't say that the father made that known and we have to live by that, too. Jesus doesn't say that he goes against many of the religious laws in order to bring about an understanding of God that has nothing to do with us against them, that has nothing to do with violence against them, but everything to do with bringing people together in the spirit of love. Jesus doesn't go against his religious tradition in order to do this. He is firmly within it. In fact, the prophet Isaiah shows throughout his book a vision where everybody, all the nations, including those that we thought never belonged in the people of God, are coming in. Are invited in. Are welcomed in just as they are. That's what the church is about!

That was the ancient controversy within the church – are we going to live out this vision that Isaiah gives to us or not? Are we going to live out this vision, these teachings, this life that Jesus gave to

us, or not? The early church led by Peter and many others insisted, sometimes they got it right, sometimes they got it wrong, but overall they insisted that everybody belonged. This fractured the early church because there were people who didn't want to make this progressive move. There were early followers of Jesus who said no, we have to follow the law that says that everybody needs to be circumcised because that's clearly written in the Book of Genesis and that's one of our most important laws. That divides us and them and we have to hold on to it because that's what the law says.

The movement that won the day in early Christianity said that we don't care what the law says, Jesus gave us one law, one commandment, that we love one another as he loved us. And that's what we're going to live by, so any laws that lead us to love our fellow human beings more, we're going to live by those laws. Any laws that lead us to not love and leads us to harm others, we're not going to follow those laws. They're being washed away. What does this mean for us?

Three years ago, we were preparing our sanctuary for Christmas. We were decorating the Christmas tree and hanging the greens and somebody came into our church wanting to talk with the pastor. So I went and talked with him. He'd seen one of our signs on our board that was open and affirming of our LGBTQIA siblings and he said if I were to come to this church would we be able to have a conversation about how Christians shouldn't be open and affirming of our LGBTQIA siblings? This guy was under the impression that to be a Christian means that you can divide the world up into us and them. So I looked him in the eyes and I said, "No. We're not having that conversation." I looked into the sanctuary and I saw Charlie hanging the greens, I saw Amira decorating the church and I thought that I am not having a debate about these people because I love them. Jesus calls us to love one another and we're not having the debate because the debate ended 2,000 years ago!! Can I get an amen and a hallelujah?!?

This debate about other people's humanity being included as they are ended 2,000 years ago. It is no longer a debate. Gentiles are included as gentiles, they don't have to follow a law that cuts off part of their humanity in order to be fully included into the people of God. Our LGBTQIA siblings do not have to follow a law that – I will tell you has been misunderstood especially since the 19th Century – in order to become welcome into the people of God, no matter how you interpret those laws, if they lead us to be us against them, who's included and who is excluded, we're not following them. Because Jesus didn't follow them. Peter didn't follow them, and we're not following them either. Because in the Realm of God everyone is included. Thanks be to God! Amen