

Finding Life Despite our Differences

Acts 11:1-9

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz
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By now, there are some things that I think I should have been able to figure out:

Worrying about what I can't control doesn't help anything.

Trying to grow tomatoes in the Northwest is expecting too much, even of God.

Putting things in a pile with the intention to read them later means in fact that I will never read them.

Squeezing the toothpaste tube from the bottom and not the top is something I will never do no matter how much someone I live with would appreciate it.

And by now, you'd think I would have figured out that getting to know people who are different from me in major ways can be a blessing and not just a cause of anxiety and stress.

We run into the reality of differences all the time:

We meet difference in our growing, changing selves.

We struggle with differences in our marriages and relationships with spouses and partners who are also changing and have different beliefs, values, attitudes than we do.

We live with different needs in families, different desires at church, and different hopes as communities and nations.

The presence and challenge of so much difference in our lives is why we find such comfort in being with people like us – and why it is often unsettling and upsetting when those communities of stability and familiarity change.

The presence of difference can lead to strong feelings:

The kind of strong feelings we have maybe felt and seen about a mosque being built near the site of Ground Zero.

Feelings about Glen Beck speaking at the Lincoln Memorial yesterday.

Feelings about the new employee at work with the strange new ideas.

Feelings about the family member who keeps forwarding us the emails from groups we don't like.

Some of you are struggling today with differences that are hard. Peter is struggling with differences in today's scripture reading.

Peter, one of Jesus original followers, has believed that to be a member of this new Christian community that you need to do it just like him. (Of course!) To be a follower of Jesus you need first to be a good Jew – you need to be circumcised, eat only the right foods and swear off the pork roast.

Then Peter has a vision that breaks open everything he has believed and the categories he has used to make sense of the world.

Now word has gotten back to his superiors who are furious about what they have heard he is doing and worried about how to build a strong, coherent community of faith that includes Jews and non-Jews. Listen for the word of God:

The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it - heard that the non-Jewish "outsiders" were now "in." When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: "What do you think you're doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?" So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step:

"Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance and saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven and settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds - you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in. Then I heard a voice:

'Go to it, Peter - kill and eat.'

I said, 'Oh, no, Master. I've never so much as tasted food that wasn't kosher.' The voice spoke again:

What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane. This was repeated three times before the image was drawn up to heaven.

(Scripture reading adapted from The Message.
The last two lines are from the New Jerusalem Bible.)

Through this vision, Peter realizes that nothing is outside of God's embrace. At first, that sounds great, for who cares about whether you eat shrimp salad or not? But what if God lowers into your life not a shrimp cocktail and ham sandwich from Subway from someone you have had a hard time loving. And God says to you, "What God has made

clean, you have no right to call profane.” Is there any way that you might respond that is different from getting in an argument one more time – or using it as yet one more excuse for something that we just won’t talk about?

Ecosystems are communities of diverse species that live together in ways that support the individual’s freedom and autonomy and the entire ecosystem. I am just back from vacation including a visit to Sequoia National Park and one of the most unique ecosystems in the world. In this little corner of the Sierra Nevada’s there is just the right amount of rain, just the right amount of sun, just the right temperature, altitude and soil conditions to support the growth of the largest living things on earth – 2500 to 3000 year old trees.

We went on a six mile hike in the park and saw these amazing trees and 2 bears, 13 marmots, 5 deer and 1 big rattlesnake. I was not particularly excited about seeing all the parts of the ecosystem that we saw there. But as the ranger told us, all are necessary for that ecosystem to continue to grow and flourish.

Christian faith is not about God accepting us as we are.

Not about tolerating each other or just getting along.

Christian faith is about God inviting us as we are to be changed, made new by our life together.

Here and now, with each other, despite our differences is where God meets us.

Nothing, the apostle Peter understands, stands in the way of God’s meeting us in the very differences we often run from.

This is not to say this is easy.

And not to say it is fun.

You don’t have to “like” it and it may not happen right now and as you would like it them to happen.

But the people that are different from us, and the tension that can arise in meeting them can become an opportunity to get at what is more important than our differences and what really matters.

An opportunity to have the conversations we need to have.

And what is necessary for the growth, deepening we and our society need.

Biblical scholar, Dom Crossan, shared this story this fall during his weekend with us:

Dom and fellow Biblical scholar, Tom Wright, were invited to speak at a university about their views on the resurrection.

Wright said, “Dom, these organizers have invited us just to see a good fight.

They want us to cut each other down, to hear us say why each of us thinks we are right and the other is wrong.

“What if, instead”, Wright said, “we shared what we believe about the resurrection and how that shapes what we believe the Christian life is about and how we seek to live day to day”. They agreed to do just that.

Dom shared, “What we shared about the Christian life and how we seek to live that out day to day was almost exactly the same.” Later they learned that the students felt cheated and were disappointed. They had come to see a fight with a clear winner and loser. Instead they got this....

The next time God lowers someone different than you into your life, what will you do?

Will you get in an argument?

Will you get stressed out and anxious?

Will you use it as one more excuse to have something that you don't talk about?

Or will you listen to their story and share your own;

Will you learn about the hard and holy work of dialogue?

It is not about getting it right and not about being right.

It is not about winning an argument but about being open to being changed.

Being open to an intimate encounter, to being transformed into something new – truer, deeper than either of you could have imagined before.

Last night we had a special dinner with Pedro to mark his first year of living with us as he has been going through the process of seeking political asylum. Pedro shared that the biggest differences he has struggled with this past year have been different food, a different language and a different school.

I have learned a lot about parenting and high school, hair gel and soccer.

In the past year, Pedro has learned a lot of English.

I haven't learned any new Spanish words.

In the past year, we have argued over coming to eat at the dinner table.

And had heated conversations about allowance, phone bills and summer schedules and the interpretation of what it means when we say, “We are ready to go now.”

There is much that we still do not understand about each other, and maybe never will.

But I've been changed in this past year.

And my growing has maybe been part of the growing that I have seen in his growing and maturing as well.

I've learned a little bit more about the fact that there indeed can be another way than just my way.

I have learned a little bit more about what is mine - and what is his - and what is ours to work on together.

And in that, work and challenge of living with our differences,
I realize that I indeed have been blessed. I have met God.