

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
January 13, 2008

ACTS 10:34-43

WADE IN THE WATER

The book of Acts is the second half of what scholars have come to call Luke-Acts. The Gospel according to Luke tells of Jesus earthly life and ministry and Acts of the Apostles tells of those who took up the call to spread the good news of Jesus. This passage from Acts follows a marvelous and miraculous moment in Peter's ministry and life. To understand this epiphany for Peter, it is helpful to know something about the events that happened to Peter and the disciples following the life, death and resurrection of this Jesus they followed. In the early days of what we now call "Christianity", before there was even such a distinction as "Christian", the followers of Jesus were mostly Jews. They were both Jews and disciples of Jesus. Their faith was based upon the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), the message of the Hebrew (Jewish) prophets and based upon the teachings of Jesus.

Peter, a faithful Jew, believed that Jesus had come to the Hebrew community as the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One. And the ones who followed this Jesus were also Jews. So it seemed logical to them that those who were part of this new community must be Jews or if not, they must become Jews first in order to follow Jesus.

Prior to the passage we just read, Peter is confronted with a vision, a dream, in which a large sheet is lowered from heaven. On this sheet are animals and reptiles and birds that are forbidden for Jews to eat. In this vision Peter is told to kill and eat. When Peter protests, he is told not to call profane what God has made clean.

While Peter is still reeling with this revelation from God, three men show up at his door and ask him to go the home of Cornelius, a non-Jew and a Roman centurion. This centurion has heard about Jesus and is curious. Cornelius is not just a foreigner, but a member of the army from the nation that occupied Israel at the time. Now although Cornelius was not a Jew, the text in Acts tells us that he feared God, meaning he revered God.

Peter ends up going with the 3 men to Cornelius' house believing the Spirit of God is telling him to go. When Peter arrives, he reminds everyone there that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with, visit or eat with a non-Jew. It wasn't just bad "mojo" or some superstition, it was unlawful.

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Now think about Peter for a moment...he hasn't even had time to get used to the idea that God sent him the first vision. "Hey Peter—it's okay to eat all these creatures...creatures that for your entire life you've been told were disgusting and an abomination to God. Go ahead Peter—eat them all." And before he can say, "Holy Pig", he's confronted with God's spirit telling him to go to this centurion's house. No time to say—"let me check with the higher ups at the synagogue." No time to say—"let me study this for awhile." No time to say—"well, let me pray about this and I'll get back to you." Just a kick in the gut from God that says go!

Peter lays out his problem with Cornelius being a non-Jew and he asks Cornelius why he sent for Peter. Cornelius, a man whom we already know reverences God, tells Peter he needs God. He tells Peter that God sent him a vision that said, "Go find Simon Peter. He'll help you."

Gulp...at least that's what I would have done. "He'll help you. Come on God...why me? Can't you find someone else who wouldn't have so much to lose? Isn't there somebody who's had a little more time to get used to the idea of things unclean being clean, things that were just a little while ago an abomination being okay? God—I need more time to think this through. Let me study this for awhile—say maybe a couple of years. And let me consult with other scholars and priests and elders. Then God we can be more certain that this wasn't just something I ate for dinner and really you in this vision...." Does this sound at all familiar?

But Peter doesn't take that route. After Cornelius says, "I need God" and that God told him to listen to Peter, Peter speaks. "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." Then Peter tells Cornelius about Jesus and how Jesus transformed his life and how God continues to transform his life as Peter attempts to live as Jesus taught him. And then Peter baptizes Cornelius and all those of his household.

The African slaves in this land sang "wade in the water...God's gonna trouble the water." God's gonna trouble the water. God surely troubled the water for Peter. If you read more of the book of Acts, you will hear not only this story but how Peter then had to tell this story all over again to the church in Jerusalem, defending his

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actions and telling those who weren't there that God's been troubling the waters again, just as God troubled the waters through Jesus.

Isn't that the way that God changes our understanding of who's in and who's out? God troubled the waters of Peter's day by a vision of what's clean and unclean, what's an abomination and what's acceptable. God troubled the waters in other times and places as people who were once slaves rose up to say, "God created all people equal." Truly God shows no partiality.

The slaves who sang about God troublin' the waters sang this as well: "If you don't believe I've been redeemed, just follow me down to Jordan's stream. God's gonna trouble the water." Remember—slaves weren't considered redeemable—God couldn't redeem something that wasn't even human. They sang to say as Cornelius did—I need God and I am God's child. It's taken a lot of troubled waters to get us to the place we are today and the work isn't finished yet when it comes to race and ethnicity. God is still troubling those waters.

God troubled the waters as women moved to claim their place. Truly God shows no partiality. And yet there are still places where women in this country are 2nd class—not acceptable as ministers, not given the same access to religious authority as men, not paid the same wages for the same work done by men.

God troubles the waters today as church and society argue about the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Those whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual are seen by some as unacceptable, as unredeemable. God's been troublin' the waters. God's been calling us to see with new eyes. "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." Just like Cornelius, many gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender folks reverence and fear God. They need God, they want God, and the church needs to stop standing in their way giving them full access to all the same rights and privileges of heterosexuals.

God troubled the waters when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. Jesus' baptism began his public ministry by identifying with what Luke describes as "all the people." He allied himself with the faults and failures, pains and problems, of all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us and among us. Not long into his public mission, the holier-than-thou religious leaders scorned Jesus as a "friend of gluttons and sinners." They were surely right about that.

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When we are baptized, we are called to join God in troublin' the waters. We are called to denounce evil and work for justice. We are told that we are responsible for this world...that all might have their needs met, that wars would cease, that peace would prevail. When we are baptized we are reminded of all the stories of scripture where God troubled the waters—Moses who brought the Hebrew people out of slavery, Phillip who baptized the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Jesus who broke bread with the prostitutes and tax collectors.

Baptism is the symbol that reminds us that before we chose God, God chose us. Baptism reminds us that the work is not yet done, that there are still those who have been labeled unredeemable. And every time we remember our baptism, we are called to remember that Peter's vision is for all times and all places and for all the ways we try to separate the human race into who is acceptable and who is not in God's sight. "Truly God shows no partiality."

The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, during times of doubt, fear and weariness, is said to have gained strength by recalling his baptism..."I have been baptized." I am not alone. God is with me. We are not alone. God is with us.

The Protestant Church has neglected that remembrance. Last week the confirmation class went on a field trip and visited some local churches, one of which was St. Rose Catholic Church. In our visit, one of the confirmands asked about the bowl of water that is mounted on the wall near the entrance to the worship space. We were told that as Catholics enter the worship space they dip their fingers into the bowl and make the sign of the cross as a reminder of their baptism...I have been baptized. When we remember our baptism, we are remembered into the body of Christ. We reconnect to the God who created us.

Bryan Sirchio, UCC minister and song writer, has written a song entitled, "Grace Chose You." The words are:

You were loved long before you were able to know for yourself what love is
You were bathed in the light of the Savior before you believed God exists
Your baptism was a glad celebration of grace that's been lavished on you
You were fully received long before you believed, before you were able to choose
Grace chose you.
Grace chose you. Grace chose me.
Before we could choose, grace chose me and you.

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We baptize infants and children because we believe God chooses them in baptism. How can we deny the children brought to God as infants because as adults they are what some would call an abomination? I cannot believe that God wants us to do so. "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."

Today the font is filled with water. I invite you to take the time after worship to make your way to the font, dip your fingers into the waters of baptism, make the sign of the cross if you choose, and remember your baptism. I will greet you there today.

Praise be to God who knows us all as sons and daughters.