

“No Distinction”

Acts 1:1-18

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Comedian Grocho Marx was once quoted as saying, “I don't care to belong to a club that accepts people like me as members.” The line brought a laugh, probably because it reflects just the opposite of reality. The truth of the matter is that we enjoy being members of clubs and organizations because they have people exactly like us. Whether its based on race, economics, politics, or some other thing, we tend to associate with people just like us. With that often comes the effort to keep those who are not like us out of the club or organization. This often happens in the church. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

In the Old Testament, we see the nation of Israel as a people who have been set apart from the other nations (Gentiles, as they are referred to). God had done this, but why? The Israelites thought that they knew. They were obviously superior to the other nations, either morally or religiously, and God had chosen them for that reason. It was this prejudice which is reflected in our text today. St. Peter was highly criticized for having contact with Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Cohort of the army of the Roman Empire (Acts 10:1-2) Peter had the audacity not only to enter into the house of uncircumcized men (a definite “no-no”), but he even ate with them - a sign of intimate fellowship which was strictly forbidden. Yes, those kinds of people must be kept out.

Before we rush to judge and criticize Peter's critics (which represented mainstream Jewish thinking of the time), we should reflect on our own attitudes and actions. The Christian Church is a people who have been set apart from the world. God has done this, too, but why? How often don't we think the same as the Israelites? There must be something in us which caused God to choose us. As Lutherans who talk a lot about God's grace, we probably wouldn't admit that out loud. But what are we thinking? Might we not, even for a brief moment look down upon or become exasperated with someone who is poorer than us, not as smart as we are, morally inferior to us, or, for whatever

reason, is just “different” than us? How do we react when such people come into our church? Are we warm and welcoming or standoffish and critical? We know how we *say* we would react, how we *should* react, or *think* we would react, but maybe we wouldn’t actually react in that way. Yet how easy it is to feel morally or religiously superior. How comfortable we can be when we can keep “those kind of people” who are not like us at arm’s length.

The Israelites saw the barrier between them and the Gentiles as a way to keep them out. By being circumcized, eating only the so-called “clean animals”, and following all of the other ritual rules of purity, they thought they could keep the Gentiles out.

We might see the barrier between us and the world as a way to keep “those kind of people” out. We may view repentance, faith, and doctrine the same way as the Israelites viewed their purity laws: as a way to keep unbelieving and immoral people away from us. We use these things to exclude and keep out those who are not like us.

A barrier, though, is not necessarily a bad thing. Like I said last week regarding a sheep pen, a fence not only keeps out that which is evil, but it keeps in what is good. It not only excludes, but it includes. Circumcision, dietary laws, and other ritual rules were not meant by God as a way to keep Gentiles out of the people of God, but as the very way in which they could come in to the people of God. Even in Old Testament times, God wanted all people to be His people, to be recipients of His grace, to experience His blessings, and to partake in His eternal kingdom. The barriers were to keep safe those who were already in His family. They were never meant to keep anyone out.

Thanks be to God (especially for us) that all of these barriers between Jew and Gentile have been brought down through Jesus Christ. St. Paul, in the book of Ephesians, describes how this took place:

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,

without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (Ephesians 2:11-16)

The rules and laws of the old covenant outlived their usefulness and purpose. The barrier between God and us because of sin has been shattered by the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. Sin has been forgiven and peace between God and humanity has been established.

The tearing down of the barrier between humanity and God by God also does away with barriers among people – be they ethnic, racial, economic, intellectual, political, or anything else. There is only the people of God – the Church – and those outside of it. Repentance, faith, and doctrine are not building blocks of barriers to keep people out the people of God. Rather, they are the tools and means by which people are brought into the people of God.

That’s what Peter eventually recognized – after being prodded by God in a vision. He saw a a great sheet, filled with all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds, being lowered from heaven. He was hungry, but refused eat “unclean animals”. But the Lord said (three times), “What God has made clean, do not call common.” Obviously, there were no barriers among animals regarding dietary laws.

At that very moment, men sent from Corelius in Caesarea, arrived at his door who pleaded with him to come and preach the Word of God in Cornelius’s household. Since they were Gentiles, Peter would have not been inclined to go with them. However, because of that vision, Peter saw things in an entirely new way. What God had made clean, he was not to call common. God had declared these Gentiles holy and reconciled to Him through Christ just as He had done with Peter and the other disciples of Jesus. There were no barriers between him and them.

Therefore, Peter was free to go. He preached the Word of God to them – the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what it meant for them – forgiveness, a new existence,

and life forever in the presence of God – and they received it. The text says that God gave them repentance that leads to life. God gave them faith in Christ as their Savior. God gave them His gifts through baptism. This probably offended Peter’s sensibilities at first as a life long Jew who was used to those barriers. However, at the end, he had to say, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”

This reality can be as freeing to us as it was to Peter if we can think in a new way and be guided by the Spirit of God. We don’t have to separate – even in a momentary consideration – “our kind of people” from “those kind of people.” They are all people whom God loves and for whom Jesus died and rose again.

Like Peter, we are free to speak the Word of God – the condemnation of the Law and the freeing of the Gospel – to all people without regard for whether they are the same skin color as us, the same ethnic origin as us, the same culture as us, the same economic status as us, having the same intellectual capabilities as us or any other criteria.

The Spirit of God will work now as He worked then. Through His working, they will receive the Word of God. He will give them repentance that leads to life through that Word. He will give them faith to apprehend all of God’s promises in Jesus Christ. He will give them His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation by means of water and His Word in Holy Baptism. He will prepare them to receive the strength and support by means of Jesus’ body and blood in bread and wine and His Word. And when He does, there will be no grumbling or complaining that “those kind of people” have come. Instead, we will glorify God that He has done for them what He has already done for us.

Epiphany is sometimes called the “Christmas of the Gentiles” because, through the leading of a star, God led Gentiles – the Wise Men – to His Son, Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior, too. In the same way, this incident in our text today might be called the “Easter of the Gentiles”. Here, through a special vision, God led Peter to preach the Gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection to Gentiles to make the benefits of Jesus’ work theirs, too. Let us always rejoice! There is no distinction

made by God among peoples. Therefore, let us not make any distinctions either. May the gifts which God has so freely given to us in Jesus Christ – forgiveness for all sins, a meaningful life here and now, and eternal life with Him in heaven – not only be joyously received and enjoyed by us, but freely given by us and through us to all people everywhere with no distinction. Amen.