

Sermon for Sun May 9 2021 *The Rev. Mary Bell-Plouffe*

In his book Love Wins, Rob Bell writes about a time when they had an art show in his church.

He'd been doing a series of teachings on peacemaking and invited parishioners to display their paintings, poems and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker.

One woman included a quote from Mahatma Ghandi, which a number of people found compelling.

But not everyone.

Someone attached a piece of paper to it on which was written:

'Reality check: He's in hell.'

Rob Bell comments:

Really? Gandhi's in hell?

He is? We have confirmation of this?

Later in the chapter Rob Bell writes:

'Several years ago, I heard a woman tell about the funeral of her daughter's friend, a high-school student who was killed in a car accident.

Her daughter was asked by a Christian if the young man who had died was a Christian.

She said that he told people he was an atheist

This person then said to her, 'So there's no hope then.'

Rob Bell comments:

No hope? Is that the Christian message?

No hope?

Is that what Jesus offers the world?

Is this the sacred calling of Christians

-- to announce that there's no hope?

Or, in my words, to put it another way,

Who's in; and who's out?

I was raised Roman Catholic. My mom was R.C.

but my dad was raised in the United Church.

I remember being sad as little girl, having learned in Sunday School

that because my dad wasn't Catholic, he'd be going to hell.

Who's in; and who's out?

Many of us have seen *Come From Away*. That fabulous play about the people of Gander Newfoundland, who welcomed thousands of people into their community after 9/11. They offered hospitality to one and all. They provided shelter and solace and care.

Eight years ago I was on a training course for Interim Ministry in Atlanta Georgia. I was one of 3 Canadians present. One of the other Canadians was the pastor of the Baptist church in Gander; He'd been pastor there during 9/11, his church fully involved in the community, offering incredible hospitality to these stranded strangers from all over the world. I asked him what I would need to do to join his church -- at the time I'd been an ordained Anglican priest for 17 years. He told me that to join his church I would need **a full immersion baptism**.

Who's in; and who's out?

That's the issue addressed in our epistle this morning.
*'While Peter was still speaking,
the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.
The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were **astounded**
that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,
for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.
Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people
who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?
So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.
Then they invited him to stay for several days.*

It's a very short passage -- only 4 verses, but it holds the greatest challenge and controversy faced by the early church. Do you need to be circumcised to be Christian?

Or, to put it another way,

Who's in; and who's out?

To understand this passage, we need to back up, and look not only at the setting of this passage, but at the story of the people of Israel.

Our epistle is from The Book of Acts.
The gospel of Luke and The Book of Acts
are written by the same author.
Acts is about the Apostles and the early church
and it's full title is The Acts of the Apostles.
Our 4 verses this morning come from chapter 10,
But for these verses to have any impact on us
we need to understand more of the story.
To whom is Peter speaking?
On whom does the Holy Spirit fall?
Who are the circumcised believers?
Who gets baptized?

Our story takes place in Caesarea
on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
Cornelius is an Italian centurion.
He's a devout man who fears God with all his household,
gives alms generously and prays constantly.
But he's Roman, a gentile, and an army officer at that.
He has a vision in which an angel tells him to send men to Joppa
for someone called Peter.
So Cornelius chooses 2 slaves and a devout soldier,
tells them everything about his vision
and sends them to Joppa to find Peter.

The next day, Peter is in Joppa
on the roof, praying
and he's hungry.
He falls into a trance and sees something like
a large sheet coming down from heaven
In it are all kinds of 4 footed creatures and reptiles and birds.
And Peter hears a voice: 'Get up Peter; kill and eat.'
But Peter says "By no means, Lord:
for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.
The voice says to him
'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'
This happens 3 times.
And while Peter is still pondering this strange vision
the men sent by Cornelius arrive at his door.

They explain their mission, and Peter invites them in.
The next day he leaves with them,
and some of the believers from Joppa go with him.
When they get to Caesarea the following day,
Cornelius has been waiting for them.
He's gathered all his relatives and close friends.
Peter begins to speak to them about Jesus
And it's while he is **still speaking** to them
that the Holy Spirit falls upon them.
And that's where this morning's passage picks up the story:

*'While Peter was still speaking,
the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.
The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded
that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,
for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.
Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people
who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?
So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus.*

Cornelius is a Gentile; a Roman; an officer in the army.
He shouldn't be **in** -- he should be **out**.
But Peter orders that Cornelius and all his family and friends be baptized.

Right from chapter 17 of Genesis,
where the Lord makes a covenant with Abraham
and promises he will be the father of a multitude of nations
circumcision has been the sign of that Covenant.
Abraham lived 1500-2000 years before Jesus.
That's a lot of years of religious history
and understanding and practice.

And now Peter baptizes Cornelius and his family and friends
without requiring them to be circumcised.
This is a breakthrough event in the life of the early church.
We see this, not just by the amount of space Luke devotes to the story,
but by its placement in the overall narrative,
coming directly after the conversion of Saul
and setting the stage for Saul's mission work among the Gentiles.

The story of Cornelius being baptize is repeated again in chapter 11,
when Peter is criticized by the believers in Jerusalem who ask him
'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'
And Peter tells them the whole story about Cornelius
And after listening to Peter they are silenced,
and they praise God saying,
'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

Even though **we're** not celebrating Pentecost for another 2 weeks,
this is a Holy Spirit story.
The Holy Spirit is the central focus.
It's because Cornelius and his family and friends **receive** the Holy Spirit
that Peter orders that they be baptized.

The story of Cornelius' baptism shows a shift in perspective,
for Peter, for the fellow believers from Joppa,
eventually for the believers in Jerusalem.
who initially are astounded that the Holy Spirit would fall on **Gentiles**.

It's a shift from exclusivity to inclusivity,
a shift from building walls to tearing them down.
A shift that is enlightened and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
Because that's what the Holy Spirit does.
The Holy Spirit is an inclusive Spirit.
The Holy Spirit breaks down barriers.
The Holy Spirit draws people in,
The Holy Spirit empowers us to build and to be the Kingdom of God on earth.

Are there walls **we** need to tear down?
Is there a shift **we** need to make?
Who's in; and who's out?

Amen.