

“Crossing Barriers”

Based on Acts 10:44-48

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A few days ago, the first Thursday in May, was the annual national day of prayer. Late last week, as I was going out to my car, someone had stuck a flyer on my windshield promoting a prayer event that would take place at the state house on that day. I looked at the sponsors of the event and didn't recognize anyone. I decided to go, mainly to join others in prayer but also to go to a religious event that wasn't a United Methodist thing.

Well, it was different from a typical United Methodist gathering. As I went into the atrium of the state house I saw the flag of the nation of Israel up front. On the side was a woman dressed in a unique style holding a flag in front of her that blocked her face that had a drawing of what I assume was meant to portray Jesus hovering over a city skyline. When the prayer service began, someone who runs a Christian counseling service blew a shofar, which he also blew at the end of the service. Special music was provided by a spirited choir from Genoa Christian Center. There wasn't a lot of religious diversity in the room. It appeared to be mostly Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians. But there was a lot of ethnic diversity, which was great to see. And there was a real sense of unity, which was the theme of this year's official national day of prayer, to pray for unity in America.

That prayer for unity was taken seriously by those who came up to pray. Early on, someone offered confession about how the church creates walls of division by the words we use, how we criticize others who don't believe the same way, how we fail to love each other. It was a moving confession. Another got up to pray for unity among ethnicities and acknowledged the ongoing experience of racism. Another, a navy chaplain, in his prayer referred to the phrase *e pluribus unum* and talked about the blessing of living in a nation where many heritages, religions, cultures and ideas come together. It was a good experience of unity, an authentic expression of the desire through God's help that the divisions

in our nation would be bridged and we could come together with what unites us.

And we need that, don't we? We live in a time of great division and polarization. Our politics are toxic. The United Methodist church is straining to stay together as our differing views on human sexuality have been pulling us apart for decades. All that divides us, that fosters suspicion, harms relationships, prevents healthy community...it gets tiring. I don't know about you but I am increasingly weary of all the divisiveness and those who feed into that divisiveness. I hunger and yearn for community, where there is a sense of belonging, of acknowledging that we are all in this together even though we don't see eye to eye on everything. That prayer service at the state house was one of those times. I wasn't comfortable with everything that was said at that event. I couldn't always give a strong "amen." But the Spirit was present, people's hearts were sincere, we really were united in prayer in spite of our differences. And it was a good thing to experience.

Last week and this week our scripture lesson talks about how God, through the Spirit, acts in ways to break down barriers so that people can come together. Last week it was Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Phillip was prompted by the Spirit to go to where the eunuch was and then Phillip took it from there, seeing past the ethnic and sexual barriers and instead focusing on the Ethiopian eunuch as a fellow God seeker. And today we hear of what happens when Peter crosses barriers so that he can go to the home of Gentiles to preach the gospel, following God's prompting, and then all of a sudden the Spirit comes down and Peter responds in just the right way. Peter and the rest of his fellow Jews didn't respond with dismay that these Gentiles also received the Spirit. Instead they were astounded as they took in the reality that the Spirit of God could be given even to Gentiles. Who would have thought that the God of Israel would also claim those who are not of Israel. As Peter said, God is no respecter of persons. God really does love everyone. There really is nothing that separates us from the love of God. Unfortunately, there is a lot that separates us from each other. But it doesn't have to be that way. With the Spirit's help, we can cross barriers too.

Today, I'm not going to limit myself to talking only about the scripture that was read for today. I'm going to cross the barrier of today's lectionary to talk about three ways the Spirit of God works to break down barriers. And the first one is that the Spirit breaks down the barrier of communication.

Think back to what happened on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit came down upon the apostles in the form of flames of fire. They then went out into the streets proclaiming the gospel, but all the people, who were gathered from many different lands, heard the apostles speaking in their own native language. They wondered how this could be. The barrier of communication, the barrier of not speaking a common language, was removed by the Spirit so that everyone could hear and understand the gospel. How awesome!

Of course, there were some nay-sayers, who blew them off by saying, "Look at these babblers, they must be drunk with new wine." They were turned off by all this carrying on. But Peter responded, "We aren't drunk, it's only 9 in the morning!" He then launched into his first sermon which led to 3,000 people getting baptized at the altar call. Incredible. Through the Spirit, people not only heard the gospel in their own language, but they were cut to the heart and convicted by that same Spirit. And they all joined in, swelling the size of the community of faith. What a glorious thing the Spirit did, with the cooperation of the apostles and the open hearts of all those people in the streets of Jerusalem that Pentecost.

The second barrier the Spirit breaks down is the barrier of hospitality. One day, Peter had a vision. He fell into a trance. And in the spirit he saw a sheet come down from the sky. On top of the sheet were a large number of unclean animals. The voice of God speaks to Peter saying, "Go, kill and eat." And Peter was appalled. He said to God, "No, never have I eaten anything unclean in all my life. I have always kept kosher." But God said to Peter, "Do not declare unclean what I have made clean." That was the vision. And it didn't just come to Peter one time. He had the same vision three times in a row. It reminds me of when Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." Jesus asked

him the same question three times. God was really trying to make the point to Peter. Or get it through his thick head.

So what happens next? Cornelius, a Roman centurion, approaches Peter. God had told Cornelius to go get Peter and bring him to his house so that he and his household could hear the gospel. Peter and his crew went with Cornelius. And so it was that Peter found himself eating with Gentiles. That was not allowed. Jews and Gentiles were not to break bread together. But the Spirit had already primed Peter with that vision. If the Spirit had brought Cornelius and Peter together, then the barrier of who is allowed to eat with whom, that needed to be brought down. But after all, Peter should have already gotten this. Jesus was accused all the time of eating with tax collectors and sinners. He already demonstrated that he would eat with anyone who invited him to dinner. God tears down barriers, God doesn't raise barriers, certainly when it comes to building relationships, of breaking bread together.

This is, by the way, one reason why we as United Methodists practice what is called an open table when it comes to communion. It is partly as a reflection of the practice of Jesus to break bread with anyone who would have him that we say that all are invited to receive communion, even if you aren't a member or even a United Methodist. It is a scandal that who can take communion is a source of division in the church. We, as United Methodists, lean toward inclusion and seek to remove barriers to hospitality, on our good days. Still, there are barriers.

At Annual Conference there are two events that take place, scheduled at different times, but hardly anyone attends both events. One event is sponsored by Methodists for Social Action, the group with which I most affiliate. The other is the Evangelical Fellowship. These two groups represent the polarization of the United Methodist church. Last year, I determined that I was going to cross the barrier and I went to that Evangelical Fellowship gathering. I won't lie, it was a little awkward. I know there were some people in the room wondering, "What is Kevin doing here?" It did feel a little strange. The speaker said things that didn't sit well with me. But, I broke bread with people who never go to the MFSA event. It was a small attempt to do some barrier crossing. I would do it again. And it would be great if some of the Evangelical

Fellowship people would come over to the MFSA event. How I wish there was a lot more barrier crossing when it comes to breaking bread together. I am sure it is what the Spirit wants to have happen. And yet, maybe for fear of what others might think, or because we don't like being around people whose ideas we find repugnant and even hurtful, we just can't go there. It's a struggle. It's something a lot of us need to work through.

The third barrier the Spirit breaks down is the barrier of exclusion. I have already hinted at this. When Jesus ascended, he gave the command that his apostles go from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth proclaiming the gospel to all nations. They had preached in Jerusalem. Phillip preached in Samaria, and then witnessed to an Ethiopian, who represents the end of the earth. But up to this point they had only been preaching to Jews. No one was thinking that Gentiles were meant to be included. Jesus is the messiah that the Jews had been waiting for, so that Israel would be restored, reconciled with God. Gentiles are outside of this circle.

But God prompted Cornelius to go find Peter. Peter came along with Cornelius. He preached the gospel to Gentiles. And then all of a sudden the Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles. Peter and his crew were astonished. The same Spirit that fell on the apostles has fallen on these Gentiles. The barrier between Jews and Gentiles was brought down. Gentiles were included in God's salvation. Who knew? Amazing.

So Peter asks the question, "What prevents the water for baptism being applied to these people?" The answer is, "Nothing." Just like the eunuch, who asked, "Look! Here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" The answer: "Nothing." It appears that anyone whose heart is open to the message of the gospel is included. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you crack the door of your heart open and the Spirit comes rushing in. The Spirit has taken down the barrier of exclusion. Anyone willing to believe the gospel is accepted.

The Spirit has taken down the barriers. But we are so good at raising them right back up. What barriers remain for you? I have already mentioned some common ones: race or ethnicity, sexual identity, theological position, politics. But what if another barrier is

misunderstandings about God? I wonder if we sometimes put limits on what God can do or who God can associate with. We don't think God could be doing anything good through the efforts of certain people. God could never be present and working healing in certain places. I wonder if God is doing amazing things, healing and transforming lives, lifting people up and empowering them to live full and meaningful lives, but we aren't aware of it because we don't run in those circles. We don't cross the political, social, ethnic, or theological barriers to see what is happening over there. Or maybe sometimes we think the Spirit can't work through *us*. We aren't good enough, or holy enough, or smart enough, or qualified. How do we limit the movement of the Spirit in *our* lives? In this church?

Especially in these polarizing times, it is critical for us to cross barriers, to mingle with people we don't normally socialize with, to engage with people we avoid because of their politics or religious views. We need to push back our barriers a little. We may be surprised what we find, that the Spirit is at work in those places and among those people we avoid or distance ourselves from, for whatever reason. We may actually find there is more that unites us than divides us. We may find reason to rejoice and be in awe that God is not bound. God is unbound, free, constantly pushing and pulling down barriers so that there is a possibility for unity in love to manifest. That's my challenge for us. Will we cooperate with God in the bringing down of barriers? What barriers do we have that we need to pull down?