

Message for October 1, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church  
“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask...Where Do We Go From Here?”  
Rev. Trish Eckert

To begin, I want to note that the reading from Acts that we just heard was too abbreviated, which I realized after printing the bulletin. We heard Peter speaking, but we don’t really know who Peter is talking to or what led to his being with them in the first place. So, a quick summary of Acts, chapter 10 will reveal how it relates to today’s theme: Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort is living in Caesarea, and he has a vision. An angel appears to him and tells him to find a man named Peter who is lodging in the city of Joppa. Cornelius sends 2 servants and a soldier to Joppa. The next day, Peter has a vision – he sees something like a sheet descending from heaven, lowered by its four corners, and it is full of animals, reptiles, and birds. Peter hears a voice, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” Peter refuses because some of the animals were ceremonially “unclean” under Jewish law. This message comes to him three times, and then he comes out of the trance. And as Peter ponders this vision, the 3 men Cornelius sent approach him. The Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with the men to Caesarea. So Peter travels with the men to Caesarea, and meets Cornelius and his whole household who are gathered together. Now, Jews didn’t typically go into Gentiles’ homes, but Peter concludes that God wants him to visit with Cornelius. As the two men are talking, Cornelius recounts his vision to Peter – that an angel told him to seek out Peter. Up to this point, the gospel message had only been preached to the Jews, but Peter realizes God wanted to include the Gentiles in the Church, as well. Peter tells Cornelius about Jesus’ anointing by the Holy Spirit, His ministry, His death, and His resurrection from the dead. Peter tells Cornelius and his household that anyone who believes receives forgiveness. While Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit “fell on all who heard.” The people speak in tongues, extolling God. Peter baptizes Cornelius’ household and they become the first Gentile believers.

The colorful image on page 8 of your bulletin is entitled, “Draw the Circle Wider,” created by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, which applies beautifully to this story. Peter draws the circle wider.

I have a confession. I tend to be a rule follower. I love things that are done decently and in order. I find comfort in knowing that there are rules and regulations, standards, “do’s and don’ts” in our daily lives. Maybe that is one indication that being Presbyterian is a good fit for me! ;)

Rule followers must always keep one thing in mind: sometimes the rules change. As a devout Jew, Peter had been raised to follow spiritual and ritualistic laws passed down from generation to generation. These rules were established to set apart the people of God. The rules were set to create space and rhythm around work, worship, and daily living. The rules were woven into the lives of the people as expressed through prophets, priests, and kings.

And then there was Jesus. Peter followed Jesus in his earthly ministry. Jesus was known to take rules and redefine what it meant to embody those rules. Jesus healed on

the Sabbath. Jesus dined with tax collectors and sex workers. Jesus called people to stop hiding in trees, whispered truths to seekers in the middle of the night, and told people to stand up tall /for there was no one to throw stones any longer. Peter was a first-hand witness to Christ's ministry of inclusion and the incarnational ministry of drawing the circle wide.

In Acts, we find Peter established as the pioneer of the first church. Peter was a rule follower, not perfect, but passionate about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Passionate rule followers must participate in the spiritual practice of worshiping the One who makes the rules and not the rules in and of themselves. As a fellow rule follower, I can only imagine Peter's reaction to this vision of a sheet filled with ritualistically unclean foods. I can only imagine Peter's thought process of being asked to kill and eat these unclean things. I can only imagine the struggle of digesting the divine message declaring, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15)

Thanks be to God that there is a wideness in God's mercy. There is hope for the faithful rule follower. God will draw the circle wider to include everyone to receive God's message of grace, justice, and love. God will open our eyes, show us what is in our sheet, and give us new ways to proclaim the lifesaving, world-changing, transformative message of Jesus Christ.

Now, the reading from Ruth today was something we actually explored just two months ago, but we've added four additional verses to round out the first chapter, and we get to look through this lens of "where do we go from here" when we hear this familiar story. Through it, we witness lessons in grief, grace, and growing together.

In many ways, the first chapter of Ruth encompasses all of the sub-themes in our series: 1) Where are you from? (In the case of Ruth and Naomi, Bethlehem/Moab); 2) Where does it hurt? (Naomi's identity completely shifts and she takes the name, "Mara," which when translated from the Hebrew means, "bitter." Naomi acknowledges that "it hurts everywhere."); 3) What do you need? (Naomi wants to be alone but Ruth won't allow it); 4) Where do we go from here? (Ruth and Naomi leave the famine and arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest, symbolizing their new beginning). Looking back on this four-week series, we are invited to consider what it looks like for us as a community to step into a new beginning together, acknowledging the scars and the wounds we each carry.

The story of Ruth and Naomi offers an inside look at grief, loss, and God's ability to redefine the meaning of family and community. In grief and loss, it is easy to withdraw and handle heavy burdens alone. Grief can be dizzying, filling the person with a wide range of emotions. While a few verses mention the death of a father and two sons, there are thousands of unwritten pages of pain, emotion, grief, and loss in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah that we will never know.

Naomi carried an additional burden, knowing her daughter-in-laws would have to navigate as single women within a patriarchal society. Naomi's natural response to the

pain is one of fear, anger, and isolation. One daughter-in-law respects Naomi's wishes and returns to her familial surroundings. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, does not. Ruth's response echoes the unending and far-reaching love of God. Ruth's response is not one of fight or flight, but is rooted and grounded in being bound to another. In the face of loss, these family ties are deepened through a spiritual bond of connection, commitment, and community. Ruth is willing to live, worship, work, advocate, walk alongside, and find her earthly resting place with Naomi from this day forward.

In our own time and place, we have experienced a lot of death, grief, and loss in the midst of a global pandemic, racial brokenness, economic disparity, and political division. Can you imagine a world where we took spiritual oaths like the one we find in the book of Ruth? What if we resisted the temptation to fight or flee in the face of grief, pain, and oppression? What if we took these vows with members of our human family? Imagine a member of the human family before you and speak these words aloud to them: By the mercy of God and because of God's grace, we are bound to one another. Your pain is not your own but is now my pain. The plight of your people is held in my hands and my heart as if they were my own. Where you journey and work, I too, will journey and work alongside you, with God's help. Where your bones are buried, may I too, find a resting place and declare every earthly resting place sacred in the eyes of God.

As this series comes to a close, I want to bring this morning's message to a close with another poetry prayer from Sarah Are, entitled "The Way Home," which speaks to the uncertainty and the promise before us:

Do you think,  
when they got to the end of the  
Edmund Pettus bridge  
they asked,  
"Where do we go from here?"

Do you think,  
when the church voted for all  
people to preach and lead  
that they asked,  
"Where do we go from here?"

Do you think,  
when your parents had their first fight  
with you sleeping peacefully in the next  
room,  
that they asked in hushed voices,  
"Where do we go from here?"

Do you think that maybe people  
have been asking this question

for as long as we've been asking  
questions?

I don't know for sure,

but I do know that I want to ask hard  
questions with you.

So here it goes—

"Where are you from?

Where does it hurt?

What do you need?

And where do we go from here?"

I pray,

I trust,

I believe—

if we keep asking,

we just might find our way home.