

Widening the Welcome W.I.S.E.ly

A Meditation on Acts 11:1-18

*Glenview Community Church
(United Church of Christ)
Glenview, Illinois*

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*The Spirit told me not to make a distinction between them and us...
Who was I that I could hinder God? – Acts 11:12, 18*

Jack was career military. U.S. Army. Infantry.

Over two tours of duty in Vietnam, Jack witnessed within the troops so much grief and guilt, anxiety and depression, alcohol and drug addiction, divorces and suicides, that he decided to answer God's call and devote the rest of his life to military service as an Army chaplain.

Jack and Annabelle lived in the same seminary student apartment building as Meg and I. They had a daughter, Rebecca, a delightful child, always well behaved, whom we babysat when they took seminars specific to military chaplaincy. Rebecca was fascinated by our ten-gallon aquarium.

Once, as a thank you gift for staying with us, Rebecca decided our aquarium needed a goldfish. Compared to the tiny neon tetras, tiger barbs, and miniature angels, the one she gave us was a giant. So, she named him "Big John." The tropical fish did not welcome the goldfish and soon began disappearing from the tank. Something about the indiscriminate eating habits of goldfish...

Needing a break from the books, our two families got away one day to the amusement park in Hershey, Pennsylvania...where, at that time, you could ride in a cocoa bean through the chocolate factory, before going up-and-down on the rollercoaster and round-and-round on the tilt-a-whirl. A wonderful time was had by all...until, driving back to the seminary, we stopped for dinner.

Having eaten our fill of elephant ears, cotton candy, and every form of chocolate Hershey makes, we thought a more nutritious, sit-down supper was in order. Spotting a restaurant along the road, we parked the car. Jack and I went inside to check if there was a table for five. "Of course," the host replied, smiling. At that hour, the restaurant was less than half full.

Jack went back to the car to get the others, while I stood in the lobby looking at the menu. Seeing Rebecca tagging behind Annabelle and Meg, the host suddenly became formal. "Do you have a reservation?" he asked, knowing we did not. "I'm sorry, but our dining room is full this evening." The clientele at this restaurant were too discriminating to eat with families with children.

In the scripture assigned for Mental Health Sunday, St. Peter is called on the carpet for staying in the house of a Gentile and eating with this Gentile's family and friends. "You went into the home of the uncircumcised," members of the Jerusalem church accuse him, "and you ate with them!"

The Gentile's name was Cornelius, a career soldier stationed in the coastal city of Caesarea where the Roman governor of Judea was headquartered. Roman legions consisted of several units called cohorts, typically comprised of 480 troops each. Every cohort then was subdivided into six companies of around 80 troops, led by an officer called a centurion. Cornelius was one of the six centurions in the Italian Cohort which occupied Caesarea in the first and early second centuries.

A centurion was a soldier's soldier, the equivalent of a non-commissioned officer, one who had risen through the ranks by virtue of bravery in battle and skill in warfare. Centurions served as frontline officers. They led the charge into combat when enemy forces were freshest, and rallied the troops when the fighting was fiercest. Wise commanders valued input from centurions when drawing up battleplans. As you might imagine, the casualty rate among centurions was high.

Scripture also describes Cornelius as a "God-fearer" – a technical term for a Gentile who believes in God, prays to God, gives alms to God, helps God's people in need, but who, nevertheless, is excluded from worshipping God in all areas of the Temple except the furthestmost outer court.

One day Cornelius hears an angel calling his name, telling him his prayers have been heard and that he is to send for Peter.

The next day Peter has a vision, while praying, at a time when he is hungry. Strangely, he sees something like a linen sheet, descending from the heavens, bearing all manner of unclean animals. He also hears a voice telling him to kill and eat. 'Here, Peter, how about a little lobster or crab meat appetizer? Some scallops or mussels? The shrimp or the calamari? And for the main course, try the pork roast or the wild boar sausage. The squirrel and the rabbit are both good today. So too are the frog legs. We also have catfish, ostrich, and escargot if you like...'

Peter turns up his nose. We might turn up our noses, too, at some of these. But they are all found on restaurant menus today. So, if we turn up our noses, it is a matter of individual taste. Peter turns up his nose because none of these foods are kosher, because eating them is forbidden in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, because they are considered "unclean."

In one of Luke's famous triads, three times Peter is instructed to "Get up, kill, and eat." Three times Peter exclaims "Absolutely not! I have never eaten anything that is impure or unclean." And three times the voice from heaven replies "Never consider unclean what God has made clean." Luke either tells or refers to that vision three times in the book of Acts. Why? Because that vision proved critical in the struggle of the early church to reject the evil of exclusive practices and to embrace the Spirit's guidance into an ever-widening circle of inclusive love.

While Peter is puzzling over the vision's meaning, a delegation Cornelius had sent knocks on the door and tells Peter a holy angel is summoning him to accept an invitation from the centurion.

Peter goes with them. He enters the unclean house, talks with the unclean man, sits at the unclean table, eats the unclean food, stays under the unclean roof...experiences the Holy Spirit descending upon the centurion's family and friends...recognizes (like the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch we explored last Sunday) that there is nothing to prevent them from being baptized into the community of the Christian community...and for that he is called on the carpet by the religious insiders who did not want outsiders anywhere around them.

"You went into the home of the uncircumcised and ate with them!" Peter's response: "The Spirit told me not to make a distinction between them and us... Who was I that I could hinder God?"

Coming before us at today's congregational meeting is a resolution to become a W.I.S.E. church – one that is welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged with respect to persons facing mental challenges, their families, and their caregivers. Churches like to think of themselves as places where all are welcome. But those suffering from various mental illnesses, disorders, addictions, and brain traumas still experience congregations as unwelcoming of their presence and unappreciative of their gifts. Old societal stigmas, fears, myths, and attitudes stand in the way.

Let me speak personally. I suffer with depression and have been on medication for the last several decades. I believe my father and his father both suffered from depression but did nothing about it. Seeing my mother suffer with extreme anxiety, I once asked if she would please talk with the family doctor about getting help. Her response was fiery: "I am not crazy!" One of our sons takes medication to deal with his depression, as do three of our grandchildren. Our family is not alone. One in four families has a member dealing with mental health challenges of one sort or another.

I share the following story with permission. One of our grandchildren became depressed enough that he needed hospitalization, counseling, and group therapy. This grandchild is a straight A student, a rule follower, often complimented by teachers for being especially kind and helpful. During that period in his life, after making considerable progress, his parents, physicians, and counselors thought it would be good to reward him with a return to his elementary class to enjoy the school Halloween party. His classroom teachers thought that would be wonderful. So did the Vice-Principal. But the Principal said "No," citing a rule about students not being able to attend school parties if they have been absent from the classroom. Our family argued that the intent of that rule was to keep students with communicable diseases and students who had skipped classes from being allowed at special events – not students who had kept up with all their schoolwork when circumstances required them to engage in distance learning; and that the rule certainly did not apply to students who have never shown any violent behaviors toward others. Finally, the principal gave in, but only if one parent also attended the Halloween party, sat the entire school day in the classroom, and walked beside our grandchild in the parade – the only parent required to do so. "See," said our grandchild, "I told you they would be afraid of me."

Barriers to full inclusion of those facing mental health challenges continue to stand. Stigmas and fears continue to signal you-are-not-welcomed here. It must not be so in the church. Not any longer. Not when the Spirit is telling us not to make a distinction between them and us...for who are we that we should hinder God?