

“Come, Follow Me: Crossing”
Acts 10:34-48

A friend recently shared an interesting story with me. It was about a Roman Catholic priest who had to resign because he had made a mistake in the words he spoke at the baptisms he performed. Instead of saying, “I baptize you,” he said, “We baptize you.” This according to the leadership of the Roman Catholic church is a huge mistake because according to their teachings, Christ is the one who baptizes and not the congregation. Here is a video clip of the story: <https://youtu.be/z7h6n28DqY8>.

We may find this story odd or even silly, but it is not uncommon for us as human beings to get stuck in our rigid rules and understandings of God’s grace and love. Throughout our human history, we have often missed the point of the expansiveness of God’s love because our love is often limited. We are born with the capacity to love as God loves, but somewhere along the way, hurt and fear limit that ability. Part of the work of discipleship is to allow God to help us to reclaim that deep love.

We have been looking at how God expanded and healed Peter to become a great disciple of the way of Jesus. Today we look at another way Peter was challenged and transformed to grow in his ability to love beyond the human limits of his religion and culture. The situation was escalating. The push of the Holy Spirit to move the boundaries of the gospel was getting stronger and here we have the head of the church changing his mind on this issue and getting bold about baptizing the Gentiles. But the rules of their Jewish religion seemed to be very clear: All new followers of Jesus must follow the same Jewish rituals (especially circumcision). Peter was hesitant to engage in an outreach to the Gentiles because this matter was not even resolved by the leadership of the church. It does not get resolved until chapter 15 of Acts. There is also "The Antioch Incident" which is mentioned in Galatians 2:11-13, where Paul and Peter saw things differently on this issue in Antioch. Paul wanted to reach out to the Gentiles while Peter flip-flopped on the issue. So, to see Peter become a strong advocate of mission to the Gentiles was a big deal. God’s Spirit compelled him to cross beyond the limits of his love and the norms of his religion to include those outside the faith.

In the first part of the chapter which we did not read for today, we hear about Peter having a vision about God sanctioning food that was not sanctioned before. In his vision, God was inviting him to eat things that were clearly defined as not kosher/lawful to eat in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The voice of God spoke to Peter in that vision to eat what was to be considered unlawful to eat. Peter was faced with a huge ethical dilemma. If he was to eat of the unlawful food, he would have been breaking the Law of Moses and forgetting what he had learned in the scriptures. But the trance/vision he was in was clearly the work of the Spirit and he knew the voice of God in his life and it was a strong message about God's inclusive love. Peter decided to err on the side of following the voice of God in his life instead of the letter of the law. Peter, who was cowardly enough to deny Jesus when he was arrested and executed, had found a new courage in his faith to go against the "proper" teachings of his faith to reach out in love to the Gentiles. Not only was Peter breaking the laws of his faith by welcoming Gentiles without having them

become Jewish first, he was also including a Roman centurion into the fold of faith. A centurion would have represented the worst of the oppression of the Roman Empire and its occupation of Israel. Centurions were a special class of Roman soldiers who commanded 100 men. They had privileges which the regular soldiers did not. They rode horses. They did not march on foot. They had power to beat the marching soldiers. They were allowed to carry a long staff for beating and directing the foot soldiers. They had special protective armor. They were lifelong soldiers. All of this would have been more than enough for Peter to refuse to baptize Cornelius. He represented the enemy and the unclean Gentiles in the worst possible way. The Spirit also worked on Cornelius's own heart. He had a vision about his need to seek Peter. Both Cornelius and Peter were led by the power of the Holy Spirit to come together around the message of the gospel. Two enemies who would have had nothing to do with each other are brought together to share in God's love.

So what does this say to us today about our discipleship? We need to allow the Holy Spirit to help us cross the barriers that separate us from others to show God's love. We often think that we want people to come to church and be like us, but the challenge for us is to remember that the hard work of discipleship is in our daily lives. We get equipped here so that we may go out and reach people where they are. As many churches around the country have experienced numerical decline, we are tempted to hold onto what we know. But the good news of God is much bigger than one church, one place, or one time.

One of the gifts of my time with my mom was someone who crossed a barrier to share faith with me. During that week, I had prayed asking God to give me guidance as to what to say or do for my mom to help her find spiritual peace. That same evening, my niece and I went to see my mom, and one of the Hospice workers took me aside and told me something like this, "I received a message from God for you. I have only met you once and we never spoke before, but I am a prophet and God wants you to know that as the spiritual connection for your family, you are the one who needs to release your mom. She is ready to go but needs you to bless her. This is not easy for me to say, but I obey God when I get messages like this." As you can imagine, I was surprised as I had believed that it was others in the family who needed to do that work, but her words were such a blessing to me as they led me to reach out to one of my spiritual mentors and friends who ended up giving such wise counsel which helped me and my whole family bless my mom to return to her eternal home while giving her the assurance that our bond is eternal. The courage of this woman and her willingness to risk her job to help others were such tremendous gifts to us. Most likely she and I will never meet again, but the faith we shared was deeply important to the work of the kingdom of God in the larger sense of the Church. This is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of breaking down the barriers of separation. It is the power of love and compassion that leads us to see beyond our small concerns. Peter may have never seen Cornelius after that time, but the blessing and faith they shared were the beginning of the blessing of many. Sometimes we think that crossing barriers has to be only about doing big and heroic things but most of the time, it is about the everyday encounters and interactions when we are able to see and connect with others as our brothers and sisters. If Peter, can reach out to a Roman Centurion with God's love, nothing is impossible for God's way of love in our world today. If God can

bring Peter and Cornelius together, we too can cross into that pure realm of love where divisions and hatreds cease to define us and only love remains. We will end with a video from The Work of the People called "Let Us Love" which is inspired by 1 John 3:16-24, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/let-us-love>. Amen.