

(3rd Sunday of Easter)

Acts 10

“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

This past Sunday, 8 youth who made up the entire Confirmation Class at First United Methodist Church in Omaha, Nebraska, declined to join the church.

In a letter to their local church and the national United Methodist Church, these 8 youth stated their reason: “We have spent the year learning about our faith and clarifying our beliefs. Most of us started the confirmation year assuming that we would join the church at the end, but with the action of the general conference in February, we are disappointed about the direction the United Methodist denomination is heading,” they wrote. “We are concerned that if we join at this time, we will be sending a message that we approve of this decision.”

As reminder, the United Methodist held a special General Conference to discuss multiple plans that would move them forward together around the issue of same-sex marriage and ordination of openly LGBTQ clergy. As we know from our own Presbyterian discussions, this is a very difficult and hotly debated issue. As Presbyterians, we found a way, through the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force report. In 2006, the 217 General Assembly adopted the report, leading to the next General Assembly and majority of Presbyteries passing the proposal to allow for ordination of openly LGBTQ clergy and ministers preside at and local congregations to host same-sex marriage ceremonies. Staci and I were honored to participate in our good friend and colleague, Rev. Scott Anderson’s ordination service in October 2010.

The United Methodist have finally arrived at the point we did a number of years ago. Like the Presbyterian Church (USA) not everyone in the United Methodist are happy with the decision which adopted what is referred to as the “Traditional Plan” which still bars ordination and same-sex marriage within the global United Methodist Denomination, while enforcing ecclesiastical punishment for those who openly defy this global ruling.

As you might expect, their decision has greatly saddened many congregations, clergy, and as you heard, youth. The Methodist are on the verge of splitting over this decision.

As Presbyterians, we too lost entire congregations and clergy, including, and I found this interesting, female clergy who opposed same-sex marriage and ordination. Interesting because many congregations, individual members and clergy left when women were ordained. The same when we began to ordain blacks. I am guessing OCPC lost some members over the Presbyterian Church’s crossing this barrier and welcoming into full ministry our LGBTQ brothers and sisters-in-Christ. The Bible can be a dangerous weapon to use against people different from us.

Peter is praying. It is close to the noon hour and he is hungry. While it is being prepared, he falls into a trance, and has a vision. The heavens open, and "something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'"

Of course, Peter understands that this really isn't about unclean food. Peter is Jewish, so was Jesus. The Scriptures and Law of Moses were very clear as to what was and who were "clean" and "acceptable". Jews were. Gentiles were not. There were very clear boundaries and Peter was not about to illegally cross them.

I was once in a similar place with my faith and understanding of who were the "clean" ones and who were the "profane".

When I was a senior in high school I attended the General Assembly in San Diego as a "YAD" or Youth Advisory Delegate. It was one of the first GA's where the then United (or Northern) Presbyterian Church addressed in a very continuous debate, the "sexuality" issue.

Growing up in rural southern Indiana on the northern cusp of the Bible Belt, "Homosexuality" was a "sin" and "Homosexuals" were viewed as sinners or if you will the "Unclean". I was instructed by my home church to vote against any attempt to pass changes to our church law that would fully welcome "those" people.

Like Peter, I understood the "religious" and "Church" law as very clear on who was deemed "clean" and who were "unclean" and therefore, who was welcomed into the ministry and at the table and who was not. I counted myself welcomed. I knew, or thought I knew, who was not welcomed.

At the same General Assembly was another young man, a college student, who at the time, I did not know. He was also there as a Youth Advisory Delegate too. His name is Scott Anderson.

Who do you consider to be "clean" and who are those who you believe are "unclean"? And how do you justify your beliefs?

While I did not fall into a trance and have a vision, I did begin to find myself crossing boundaries set up by the Church Law and narrow interpretations of the Bible.

As Peter was called by God to cross over three borders (physical, cultural, and religious) in violation of the Law of Moses, to encounter the Gentile Roman Centurion, Cornelius, I too was called by God to cross similar borders. As I crossed those biblical and social barriers, I met Ken Ehrke, Howard Warren, and Scott Anderson.

These people of faith opened my heart and eyes to a deeper and broader understanding of God. As God said to Peter, "What God has made sacred, you must not call profane!"

I am thankful that after all of these years, I followed God's calling, crossing borders, and in doing so, tearing down a wall of misinterpretation of Scripture that once divided me from other people.

I count Scott Anderson as one of my dearest and closest friends. He is a mentor to me and a pastor to Staci, Sam and me.

This week, I rejoiced to hear the news that those 8 confirmands knew like Peter, that we should never call anyone created by God "profane" or "unclean"! Indeed, God shows no partiality!

While we as a society seem to have taken major steps forward in acceptance of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, we seem to be taken steps backwards today.

There are those who want to continue to label some of God's people as "unclean", "untreatable", "untouchable" because of their "religious beliefs". The current administration is seeking to enforce these rules under the guise of "Religious Liberty." It is not "religious" nor is it "liberty"! It is bigotry and discrimination!

Beloved, what God has created we must never call "unclean" or "profane!"

God shows no partiality, then why are we as a people seeking to build walls and re-labeling people in our churches and by our public policies that were torn down so long ago by God through Peter's conversion and his new relationship with Cornelius?

God showed no partiality through Jesus, who in his life, crossed the religious borders that separated the Jews from the Gentiles and Samaritans.

God showed no partiality in Christ who reached beyond the religious laws that had been used to build walls separating women, outcasts, the sick, the poor, the weak and vulnerable to touch them, heal them, eat in their homes and welcome them fully into God's family!

If we are to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we too must cross boundaries and borders, tearing down the walls of hatred that seek to separate people based on fear of the other who some see as different because of their sexuality, skin color, religion, ethnic or cultural background.

In God's eyes, no one is profane or unclean. God shows no partiality. Neither should we as followers of Jesus!