

Acts 10:9-24, 34, 44-48

“Walk a Mile in my Shoes”

I came across a prayer the other day that stepped all over my toes. So I decided to share it with you to see if I am the only who needs to hear it. It is entitled *A Different Kind of Prayer*. "Heavenly Father, help us remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked nine hours that day and is rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry and spend a few precious moments with her children. Help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who cannot make change correctly is a worried 19 year old college student, balancing his apprehension over final exams with his fear of not getting his student loan for the next semester. Help us remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slow through the aisle and blocking our shopping cart are savoring this moment, knowing that the biopsy report revealed that this will be their last year to shop together. Remind us each day that, of all the gifts you give us, the greatest gift is love. And it is not enough to share this love with those we hold dear. Open our hearts not to just those who are close to us, but to all humanity. Let us be slow to judge and quick to forgive."

After examining this prayer I realized that it is a prayer about walking in someone else's shoes. And that it is exactly what the passage in Acts that we just heard is about, too. It is a story about two men who live WORLDS apart and are led by God to walk in each other's shoes on common ground. And in order to be the church in our ever changing world, having this kind of empathy for others is essential.

At first, glance, Peter and Cornelius could not be more different from each other if they had practiced! Peter was a former fisherman turned disciple of a radical, homeless rabbi who

had been put to death. He was a laborer with no life experience outside of Galilee. Cornelius, on the other hand, was a high-ranking official in the Roman political world. He lived a life of status. He was a worldly, professional, educated man. If this were a modern day movie, it might be entitled, “Dirty Harry meets the Pope!” What could they possibly have in common? Well, the Scriptures tell us that they worshipped and feared the same God. And after reading their story, it is apparent that both have a great capacity for empathy. Which makes them *willing* to at least listen to the Holy Spirit. So let’s look at their differences.

First there is the issue of food. Peter has had a very unsettling vision in which he has been ordered by God to eat food that was considered unclean by the Jews. The Levitical code of holiness which the Jews ABSOLUTELY LIVED BY was very specific: you shall not eat camel, the badger, the rabbit, the pig, any fish without fins or scales such as eel or squid. You shall not eat the eagle, the raven, or the osprey – just to name a few. It really wouldn’t bother me to leave a few of these menu items off but the truth is that many of them were considered delicacies in Greco-Roman world.

But to the Jews, these items were thought to be detestable. Eating them would not just mean eating something peculiar – as if I told you we would be having Oreos and milk for the Lord’s Supper. For a Jew to eat these things was literally a matter of life and death for an entire Jewish community. It was not about preferences or peculiarities but about honoring promises made to Yahweh.

Yet, when Peter dares to question the Lord with the idea that his food selections are a little absurd, God’s message is clear: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” When I read this I wondered what our world would look like today if we focused on THIS one line of Scripture as much as we do some others. "DO NOT CALL ANYTHING IMPURE

THAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN." Then we would all be more apt to look at people who are different, whose lifestyles we may not understand, who make choices that we would not make, who dress differently and speak differently and vote differently and consider them only as children made in the image of the one true God. Then the church would truly be an empathetic place. And we wouldn't think of different as synonymous with impure.

But with regards to Peter and Cornelius – it is the first clue that their worlds are moving closer together. In fact, God may be telling Peter that he is getting ready to walk a mile in Cornelius' shoes! So being encouraged by the Holy Spirit through the three men who stopped by his house, and having heard them say that Cornelius feared God and was respected by ALL the Jewish people, Peter decided to take the plunge and sets out for Caesarea.

On arrival, Peter was faced with a second dilemma. It was unlawful for a Jewish man to enter the house of a Gentile. In fact, this law about mingling with Gentiles was so strong that an inscription outside the Temple stated that to allow a Gentile to enter the place of Jewish worship was punishable by death. Peter realizes that walking in someone else's shoes can be not only difficult but dangerous as well. Yet, there seems to be a real common ground for walking that pushes him forward. So Peter is willing to listen to the Spirit and to follow it.

In doing so, Peter begins to REALLY examine the will of God made clear to him in the vision. But even more importantly, Peter begins to remember the teachings of his Lord – Jesus the Christ. And what becomes clear to him is this – Jesus is Lord of all – NOT SOME, but all.

So Peter comes to the only conclusion that he can. God does not show favoritism. He does not favor an individual because of his station in life, her nationality, or his material possessions. God respects character and cherishes anyone who fears him. In fact, God wants his children to be accepting and empathetic to the point that he put on OUR shoes and walked in

them. Author Susan Lenzkes say, "God left the hallowed halls of Heave and landed cold, wet and squirming on a pile of straw." And walking in our shoes led Christ to the cross for each of us here.

Peter realizes that both he and Cornelius will have to be willing to change if God's mission is to go forward. And knowing that this is EXACTLY what Jesus had preached – the coming of God's kingdom on GOD'S terms – Peter puts on the strange shoes that belong to Cornelius and begins to walk.

And this was a life-changing, radical and momentous step. By his willingness to follow the path of God, even not knowing where it would lead, Peter opened the church to those who had previously been shut out. In the first genuine case of preaching to the Gentiles, Peter publicly and officially welcomes a foreigner into the church without conformity to Jewish laws and the Christian church asserts her independence. The body of Christ on earth begins to grow as Cornelius and all those who are in his household become baptized believers.

Because of Peter's obedience and Cornelius' acceptance I have had a wonderful experience over the last ten years. I had been out of Seminary for a few years and my children were getting older and out of the house and I started feeling like I really needed to do something just for me. Not because it was expected or I could get a class credit under my belt or it would help my husband build his business. Something that was all mine!

About that time I received this random email invitation to meet at a book store in Greenville to discuss the possibility of forming a women's Interfaith Study group. It turned out to be a project that an Ordained Baptist Woman Minister was heading up as she worked toward her Doctorate with an emphasis on Interfaith Studies.

I can only say that the Holy Spirit urged me to go because I felt very intimidated and out of my league when I first met with the women who seemed so much smarter and more sophisticated than I, but I decided to join the group. And I have been so blessed that I did.

There are ten of us and we have been together for almost eleven years. There are a variety of Christian denominations represented, two women from the Baha'i faith, one Muslim, one Buddhist and one who claims to be "spiritual but not religious". We read about each other's faiths and the different faiths in the world. We do not try to convert one another but respect each other's beliefs. Not only have I broadened my horizons but I have developed friendships with some beautiful ladies of other faiths. The group has really been a gift to me.

As I read this text in Acts, I found myself thinking that if Peter and Cornelius had not followed the teachings of Christ and the urgings of the Spirit, being in such a group would have never been made possible. And of course, it has made me personally more open-minded and empathetic to the religious struggles that people face, not just in other parts of the world, but in America where our forefathers and mothers fought for religious freedom for all.

The truth is that most of us would not be willing to walk in the shoes of the nineteen-year-old tattooed boy or the single mother speeding down the highway or Peter or Cornelius because WE do not think the way God thinks. Peter finally realizes this in the heart of our passage this morning when he says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." You see, this is when empathy allows Peter to see that in God's eyes, all of us are the same. We are all just sinners in need of redemption, standing on the same, Holy ground.

For Peter, and for us, this realization is exciting, radical news! Because at this moment, I believe that Peter grasps a new understanding of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus told the criminal on the cross next to his, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." This is empathy beyond human understanding. But the Divine taught Peter and us a lesson even as he was dying. That the friendship between God and humankind SHOULD ALWAYS have existed but sin interrupted what God had intended. Jesus death made us one with God again and God's love and acceptance was given freely to us all, by grace. And that grace is for all of God's children.

So let us all learn from Peter and Cornelius, both of whom were created in the image of God, both of whom were willing to wear each other's shoes just long enough to realize that it is God's job to choose who receives salvation. And that while we wait for that salvation to come, we are all called to see each other with the eyes of compassion and love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.