

A NEW THING: New Margins - Relationships

Acts 10:44-48

May 12, 2024 – EASTER 6A

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-new-thing-new-margins-relationships/

I.

I want to confess something to you today. When I was in the 7th grade, I served detention. I did not disclose this on my application to serve as your Lead Pastor, and I feel convicted I should confess this to you today before we continue our journey further.

My crime? I accidentally left a graded homework assignment in my desk in the Science classroom, forgetting to take it with me after the bell rang. Thus, I littered. And Jeff Junior, just down the street on the corner of Madison and E. Miller, had strict rules about littering. For my delinquency, I reported for one day of after-school detention. And it devastated this obedient, rule-following, people-pleasing seventh grader. Somehow, I survived and turned my life around before it went off the rails.

The year of my detention was 1985. That was just one year after five high school students also served detention. They came from different social circles, forced to spend an entire Saturday together - the jock, the popular girl, the nerd, the rebel, the outcast. They were The Breakfast Club.

"The Breakfast Club" is a classic 1980s film directed by John Hughes. After reporting that Saturday morning to serve their time, the characters initially clash due to their differences and preconceived notions about each other. However, as they spend more time together, they open up and share their struggles, fears, and insecurities. They realize that despite their outward differences, they face similar pressures and challenges from their parents, peers, and society. When Saturday detention started, they were simply the Criminal, the Athlete, the Basket Case, the Princess, and the Brain - but by the time they walked out, they were friends and forever members of the same club, The Breakfast Club.

The movie demonstrates how individuals can find common ground and develop meaningful relationships when willing to look beyond stereotypes and embrace each other's humanity.

I didn't learn that lesson during my detention, but I did learn it later.

II.

If you were to start watching *The Breakfast Club* near the end, you would miss the heart of the movie: the hard conversations, the crumbling barriers, and the slow forming of a new club, one not focused on differences but centered on shared experiences. Aside from how they tormented the school principal, the best part of that movie was watching those five students overcome the barriers and assumptions that divided them. The Breakfast Club wouldn't be a great story if we just had the ending.

The same is true for the church. What happens in the Book of Acts, especially in chapter 10, are some of the most significant moments in the history of the Church. If we skip to the end, past the hard conversations, the crumbling barriers, and the slow forming of a new club, one not focused on differences but centered on Christ, we miss the heart or spirit of the story. If we only look at today's few assigned verses read by Scotty, it is like dropping in near the movie's end. So, let me set the scene for you.

III.

Through the first nine chapters of Acts, a lot happens. Pentecost, establishing the church, healing, teaching, and watching the Gospel spread to Samaria and the Ethiopian Eunuch. We hear Stephen's testimony before he is killed as the church's first martyr, and we observe Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. In chapter 10, Luke slows it way down and spends one and a half chapters on one guy and his household becoming followers of Jesus.

In Acts 10, we meet Cornelius, a devout and prayerful Gentile. Cornelius was a Roman Centurion, a military commander. Luke emphasizes what a good man he was – he prayed, gave generously to those in need, led his household and many under his command to worship God, and was well-spoken of by the Jewish people. And though he was uncircumcised and did not abide by many Jewish rituals and laws, Luke tells us God was paying attention to Cornelius, aware of his ways and good heart. In a vision, an angel of the Lord tells Cornelius to send some of his men to Joppa to find a man called Peter and bring him to Cornelius.

Meanwhile, Peter has a vision of his own. While waiting on the rooftop for lunch, Peter falls into a trance. He sees the heavens open and something like a big sheet lowered down, filled with all kinds of animals faithful Jews are not permitted to touch or eat. Peter then hears a voice tell him – kill and eat! But Peter protests, saying, "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." (Acts 10:14-15) This exchange between Peter and the voice happens three times. Then, the sheet is suddenly taken to heaven, and Peter is left confused.

At that very moment, there is a knock at Peter's door. Cornelius's men have arrived and, after a nudge by the Spirit, Peter and some of his friends agree to go see Cornelius.

Somewhere along the journey, it dawns on Peter that the vision he had on that rooftop is not really about unclean animals but rather unclean people – people that Peter, according to his religion, was supposed to stay away from, people whose home he should never enter. Before his rooftop vision, Peter was sure that to be a member of God's family, someone like Cornelius, a Gentile, would have to become a Jew. He would have to be circumcised and submit to the Law of Moses. But then Peter heard the Lord saying, "Don't call unclean what I have made clean." (v. 15)

And so, even though the law of Moses, the scriptures Peter loved and strictly lived by, forbade him from doing what he was about to do, the Spirit of God led him somewhere new. So, in "one

giant step for Peter, one equally giant leap for the early church,” Peter enters the home of Cornelius. According to Luke, the first words from Peter’s mouth once he crosses the threshold are these, “You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. (v. 28-29).

But God has shown me. The law says, but God has shown me. Tradition says, but God has shown me. The church says, but God has shown me. I have always thought this, but God has shown me otherwise.

Prompted by the Spirit, Peter crosses the threshold and preaches Jesus, and the Holy Spirit comes on Cornelius and the others in that home. It was the Gentile Pentecost! Peter and those who had come with him were astonished. The Greek word for astonished in Acts 10 is *existēmi* (ex-is'-tay-mee), and it means to amaze, astonish, throw into bewilderment, to be out of one's mind, besides one's self, even insane.

Peter and the others felt this when undeniable evidence of the Spirit was present in those they thought unclean. And then Peter said, “If we don’t baptize these Gentiles who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have, who are we?” And they were baptized. And verse 48 tells us Peter stayed with them for a few days ... in the house of an unclean outsider, a house he would have refused to enter a day earlier until the Spirit astonished and amazed him, a decision Peter would later have to defend multiple times before church leaders.

IV.

God is not done astonishing and amazing. God is not done doing new things that may make us feel beside ourselves or thrown into bewilderment. Peter recognizes that he is not a fixed point, nor is the church. New can be scary. Expanding boundaries can be intimidating. One pastor said, “We have never done it this way” can be a stop sign or an on-ramp. We have never done it this way before and will do anything to stop it. OR we have never done it this way before, and even though we have no idea where this road is headed, we want to follow where the Spirit leads us.

Scholar Will Willimon says it beautifully: “This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own....This does not mean an undisciplined flight of fancy into our own bold new ideas or the pitiful effort to catch the wind of the latest trend in the culture....Rather, it means that we are continuing to penetrate the significance of the scriptural witness that Jesus Christ is Lord and to be faithful to divine prodding. Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’¹

V.

While I'm confessing today, you should know I've also been to prison ... twice. Thankfully, both were just visits.

In 2009, I visited men on death row at the Luzira Maximum Security Prison in Kampala, Uganda. My middle school detention for littering did not give me any street cred with these men. The inmates there are officially referred to as "condemned men." As we went through all the security points and weaved through a maze of hallways and doors, we finally arrived at a waiting room outside a large courtyard. Through the bars, we could see the men dressed in uniforms of white shirts, shorts, and sandals milling about the yard.

They spotted our group of five white women quickly. As we discussed our curiosity and fears about what would happen next, I wondered what they were discussing. It had one of those "first-day-of-camp" feelings where groups were sizing each other up, unsure of each other and what the experience would bring.

I soon learned we would worship together. We entered the courtyard, and the sea of men parted like the Red Sea. We crossed right through, exchanging smiles and glances with the prisoners. It was strange and a bit unsettling to walk through the center of 100 or condemned men with our two guides and one or two guards.

We entered a smaller, side courtyard where some prisoners had gathered, a few with musical instruments. There was an accordion, drums, and shakers made from aerosol cans filled with small rocks and sealed with tape.

For twenty minutes we sang praises together. There were young men and old men. Some were light brown; others dark brown. Some were Ugandan, others were not. Some were Christian, some Muslim, and some were simply curious about the visitors. There was so much joy and warmth in that room as we worshipped God.

After singing, we were each invited to introduce ourselves. Someone shared I was a pastor and that "a word" would be expected. What do I share on the spot with 50 condemned Ugandan men? The Spirit brought to mind Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul talks about how we were once all condemned by sin and death. Yet, there is grace and life for all in Christ Jesus. We are no longer condemned, even if labeled such in this world, because through the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are set free from the law of sin and death. Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I told them this was a promise for them, and a promise for me, standing before them as once a condemned sister yet set free by the grace of Jesus Christ. We may have started that day as strangers with very different detention experiences, but at the end of the day, we are part of

the same club. Despite our differences, we all belong to God. God show no partiality, Peter says. God's grace covers us all.

The Holy Spirit doesn't care about all those distinctions we have made among ourselves: Jew and Gentile, Male and Female, Slave and Free, Pastor and Prisoner. The Holy Spirit is eager to pour itself out on all flesh, on any flesh that is willing to receive it. God shows no partiality but accepts any person who is open to being accepted. So the only question is:

Are we? Are we open to the Spirit leading us across new thresholds? Because if we are not continually amazed, astounded, bewildered, and even a little bit beside ourselves by what God is doing, wondering where on earth God is going now, surprised by who God leads to us, then perhaps our doors aren't wide enough, our tables not long enough, and our hearts not open enough. As Willimon said, "This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, as Karter declared in his baptism, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of Jesus's Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel, which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own." But God has shown us. Will we be a stop sign or an on-ramp to the new things God wants to do for the glory of God and the good of the world?

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.