

## Radical Inclusiveness

Sunday, May 6, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English

Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18, Revelation to John 21:1-6 and John 13:31-35

“Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.” (Acts 11:1)

Had Lynn Schramel read just that one verse from Acts 11, just think how we might have reacted! Incredible! What joy! The word of God was shared with and believed by others! Good News! Good News!

*Not* good news! The next verse spells out the opposite!:

“So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized Him, saying, “Why did you go to circumcised men and eat with them?”

In today’s parlance, can you not hear them? “You did what? You ate with whom? Are you crazy?” Luke, author of the Acts of the Apostles, then tells us how Peter shared a dream with them, a dream in which God gave Peter a vision so that he might perceive that “God gave the same gift to [the Gentiles] that he gave to [the Jews] when [they] believed in the LORD Jesus Christ.” After some silence, the disciples glorified the God of all peoples.

From today’s Gospel reading, hear the words of Christ: “By this, all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

On the one hand, all of us claim to be children of God. Yet how often we are determined to be anything but inclusive – determined, instead, to draw lines, boundaries – that delineate us from them.

On Thursday morning, I attended the Monroe County National Day of Prayer Community Breakfast. At the head table, three religious leaders sat side-by-side: Imam Muhammad Shafiq, Rabbi Alison Kobey and Dr. John Martin of Roberts Wesleyan College. Of all the National Day of Prayer Breakfasts I have attended in my years of ministry, this was the one time that all of the religious leaders “got it right.” They shared words from their own traditions, but as two sons and one daughter of Abraham, each genuinely acknowledged the presence and the legitimacy of the other two. Dr. Martin went last and, frankly, said it best. He stood to say the Benediction, introduced that his words would be unapologetically Christian, but included in his closing prayer an affirmation of his brothers and sisters of the Jewish and Islamic faiths.

I spoke to Dr. Martin afterwards, affirming how hard it is to set forth one’s unique faith in a pluralistic setting. The two of us shared how we, he as President of Roberts Wesleyan, and I as an Air Force Chaplain and now as Chaplain of the Gates-Chili Fire Department are able to be clear about who we are in the context of our relationship with Jesus Christ *and* at the same time be honorable towards and with those who differ in their religious stance. To stand shoulder to

shoulder with faithful persons of other faith traditions does *not* diminish one's belief – but it shows more than just a tolerance of others – it mirrors Jesus' invitation to “love one another.”

On Friday morning, women of many traditions gathered in this Sanctuary for the annual Church Women United service. On Friday evening, two hundred and fifty persons from across the Christian spectrum gathered at the Locust Hill Country Club to remember the life and ministry of Antoinette Blackwell Brown, the first woman ordained to Christian ministry in the United States – which occurred in Henrietta in the 1850's – and to honor and give scholarships to women who plan to study in various fields of interest. The 2007 scholarship was intriguing. It went to a woman attending seminary. That in itself is no longer new news, but in this case the woman not only lives in Gates and is involved in the ministry of one of our community's churches. She serves, along with her Pastor, St. Theodore's *Catholic* Church. We realize that although her church will not ordain her to preach the word and share the sacraments, she will, nonetheless, have a significant role to play in the life of men and women who want to know Christ.

“Radical inclusiveness.” A month ago, I chose that as the title for this sermon because of the radical nature of Peter's understanding that the word of God might be shared with Gentiles. In addition, Jesus' commandment to “love one another” challenges us to love everyone. However, there were some things I did not know about the word “radical” and in particular how it relates to our faith.

On Tuesday morning, our Presbytery's Committee on Ministry discussed the statement prepared by the Search Committee for one of our new Co-Presbyters. J.C. Rouchon is on that committee and helped compose that document. In the profile, it is acknowledged that “our Presbytery represents a spectrum of viewpoints, and its members are passionate about their issues.” But the line that wrought conversation stated: “pastors and elders seek to make ‘radical disciples of Jesus Christ, seeing God save, heal, and deliver people from all different walks in life.’” The interesting twist came when a member of the Committee on Ministry told us, and my hunt in a dictionary proved her right, that the first and primary definition of the word “radical” was not what I thought it to be. The *first* definitions of radical, grounded in its mathematical and scientific uses, is: “arising from or going to a root or source; fundamental; basic.” I am the first one to admit I would not have used the word “fundamental” as a synonym for “radical.” How word usage changes!

The bottom line, however, is that a radical notion is really a reclamation of what is basic, of what is at the core of who we should be as citizens and as Christians. If there is nothing more basic than the words of Christ, then can there be anything more basic than His final command to His disciples – that they love one another. Christ didn't say: “agree on every crossed t and dotted i.” But Jesus the Christ does expect us to be civil with one another, to be in dialogue, and to celebrate our commonalities rather than that which divides us.

An editorial in today's Democrat and Chronicle by Kathleen Parker tells one example this past week of the exchange of words between peoples in nation's capital city, Washington D.C. Ms. Parker regrets that in public debate, men and women “don't just disagree.” They, to use her word, “brawl.”

In yesterday's mail, a letter came from our Co-Presbyters, Lynn Nelson and Linda Badger Becker with instructions to read it to you. While I could have selected to read it at the start of worship during our "life in the church," for obvious reasons, I share it now:

TO THE PASTORS AND CLERKS OF SESSION OF CHURCHES OF THE PRESBYTERY OF GENESEE VALLEY, PC(USA)

Dear friends in Christ,

With pain in our hearts, we report to you that the First Presbyterian Church of Oakfield has taken steps on April 29, 2007, which they believe will result in dissociation from the Presbytery of Genesee Valley and the PC(USA). Moderator David Norton has appointed a ministry team which will report with more information and recommendations to the Presbytery on May 22, 2007.

We invite your prayers for our brothers and sisters in Oakfield and for grace and discernment for all of us in the days ahead. Further, we invite you to share this letter with your congregations in worship this Sunday, May 6th, or soon thereafter, that all may be in prayer for Holy Spirit's continued grace and guidance as we move forward in Christ's ministry and mission.

In Christ's Service,

Grace and peace,  
Blessings,

Lynn Nelson, Acting Co-Presbyter for Transition  
Linda Badger Becker, Acting Co-Presbyter for Program

To the people of Oakfield who, under the temporary pastoral leadership of someone outside the reformed tradition, feel they must leave our denomination: I share *today's* words from the three-year cycle lectionary from the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of John. I share how Imam Shafiq, Rabbi Kobey and Dr. Martin not only ate breakfast together, but, in mutual respect, prayed together on Thursday morning at the Crowne Plaza in Rochester. I share how women of many different Christian traditions gathered in this sanctuary and knew but one LORD Jesus Christ. I share how people gathered in Henrietta on Friday evening to celebrate the ministry of women and men, I share how we are one people in this nation, most of us professing to be "under God" and that despite occasional bickering, we often "get it right," and strive to meet the needs of the peoples of our nation and stand as a beacon of hope and peace to the rest of the world.

Radical? Yes if we use the definitions of the word that are "basic" and "fundamental" to who we are as the people of God. Inclusive? Yes, if we take our cues from our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God who invites us to welcome one another in love. We do so at that table and in this sanctuary, and we had better do that in all aspects of our lives and, like the disciples who made a u-turn and welcomed the Gentiles instead of rejecting them, do nothing less than rejoice in the "new heaven and new earth" of God to be discovered in the here and now, in a radical inclusiveness that is nothing short of seeing in the eyes and hearts of everyone else, a special, loved, and grace-filled sister or brother, a member of God's family to whom we extend the most welcoming of arms!

Amen!