

Acting Out: Strange People Sunday, 7/22/18

1 We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts, rekindling our passion, power, and purpose as we grow in acting out the Good News in this hurting world. Acts is all about God's forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and the mission of sharing both with the world. We're not secret agents for Jesus, we're sacred agents! And sacred agents proclaim the Gospel in deed, word, and even with the crazy "Acting Out" pictures we're still taking out in the lobby. Last week I challenged you to identify the most important part of your life that God would like you to turn around, a 180 for the sake of growing as a disciple of Jesus. I'm not going to ask you to share those now with the whole congregation, but I do want to challenge you to remember the tug of the Holy Spirit that's calling you to travel some part of your life in a new direction. It's impossible to act out God's love fully if we're walking away from God instead of walking with God.

2 This morning we're going to confront an awkward truth. Wherever we go, we're bound to encounter people who make us uncomfortable. Body piercings, gauges, and facial tattoos are just a few examples. I have to admit, I'm at least very distracted by this guy's jewelry, especially the nostril gauges. The truth is, people who aren't like us don't "make us" uncomfortable, we pretty much take care of that all by ourselves. Take an honest mental inventory of the appearances and behaviors that you find make you uneasy. Cultural differences transcend just skin color. It might be language, dress, food, or even parenting style that freaks you out. When I was in Graduate School, there was a guy in a neighboring dorm who would cook spicy Indian food that filled the whole dorm with the aroma of curry. When I lived in rural Kentucky, it took me a while to get used to the way the natives seemed to speak and move much slower than I was used to. When I lived in Texas, I was often teased for saying the word "pop" for carbonated drinks instead of "coke," even if it was a Sprite!

Cultural differences can range from the minor and amusing to the distressing and difficult. Two weeks ago, we read in Acts 8 about how persecution propelled the disciples to escape velocity, lifting them out of the familiarity of Jerusalem and into Samaria, a place where a rival Jewish sect was dominant. As the disciples continued to go new places, farther and farther away from Jerusalem, they began to meet more strange people- That is, people

who were different than they were. Let's continue the account of Peter's strange vision and how it shaped the way he thought about people who weren't Jews. I'm picking up now in verse 11 of chapter 10.

{Read Acts 11:10-18 (NLT)}.

3 Have you ever had grilled, bacon-wrapped shrimp? If you dipped it in chocolate, you could sell it at the Minnesota State Fair. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's been done. I know that some people don't like seafood, and believe it or not, some people don't like bacon. But personal preference has nothing to do with the Jewish disdain for bacon and shrimp and Peter's strange vision of the animals in the sheet. It really has very little to do with food at all. Instead, it's just another mile marker in God's plan to offer all people the Gospel of forgiveness. As early as Genesis 12, we read about God's plan to heal the great cultural divides between people groups that came about in the wake of the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. Following the Tower of Babel account in Genesis 11, God promises to Abraham that "I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others...All the families on earth will be blessed through you."¹

God's plan for blessing all people started with a focus on forming a family- the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God gave them some rules to shape their behavior and to set them apart from others. That's exactly how the bacon and shrimp problem came about. In Leviticus 11, there is a long grocery list of "clean and "unclean" foods. The list accomplished two main things. It tested the obedience of this new family, and it demonstrated to a watching world that God was doing something new. In a way, it was like circumcision, but for all Jews, not just men. It was an outward sign of an inward covenant.

4 Let's flash forward a couple of thousand years now from Abraham to Peter and his vision. We know that God's plan was always to offer Good News to everyone, not just the Jews. All throughout the Old Testament we read examples of outsiders being grafted into the family of God's children because of their faith, not because of who their parents were. Rahab, from the account of the battle of Jericho, is a great example.

¹ Genesis 12:2-3, New Living Translation (2nd Ed.)

When Jesus arrived on the scene, it was like God taking off the training wheels. The family of God was growing up, so it was time to set aside some of the old rules about behavior and teach them to rely more on faith and holiness of heart. Jesus gave ample warning that this change was coming, from his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well to his teaching that “It’s not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart.”² We know that Peter and the other apostles weren’t always the swiftest to pick up on Jesus’ teachings. So Peter’s vision was a helpful Holy-Spirit nudge for the disciples to remember what God had intended all along. With the coming of Jesus, a new age had begun. With the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it was time for the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, that all the families of the earth should be blessed. In order for that to happen, there were some very basic cultural divides that had to be overcome, especially regarding food.

5 You’d think that in 2018, food would no longer be a barrier to sharing the Good News of Jesus. Surprisingly, it still can be. The places we buy our food, the people we share it with, and our economic means to buy food still divide us culturally. We still tend to hang out with, identify with, and even eat with people who are most like us, not because we imagine God endorses our meal practices over those of another, but because of that old inertia problem. Change is hard, and adapting to anything new requires energy and courage. And yet, if we stay safely huddled in the Upper Room of our familiar routines and fail to leave Jerusalem, we’re never going to begin to meet people who aren’t like us.

One of my least favorite things to see on a church sign is the phrase, “All are welcome.” Really? If you have to write that on a sign, there’s a problem. That would be like the Apostles saying to the Gentiles, you’re all welcome now to come to the Jerusalem and worship at the Temple. People don’t need to be told they’re welcome so much as shown that they’re welcome. When I see a sign like that I imagine a church that’s expecting the world to come to them, instead of church reaching out in the world. I imagine a church trying to tolerate new people instead of a church that says, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For [we] are all one in Christ Jesus.”³

² Mark 17:15, Ibid

³ Galatians 3:28, Ibid

Some of you remember the “Surprise the World” study we did during Lent. The second habit we worked on in our goal to be more missional was to eat with three people each week, at least one of whom was not a member of this church. Did anyone try doing that, at least for a while? If you want to revisit that habit and take that one step further, how about eating with one person each month who is really different from you; someone who might not think to walk into our church because of who they are, where they live, how they’re dressed, or what they believe?

6 Jesus didn’t die to save only white, clean-skinned, middle-class, exurban Americans. I seriously doubt that Jesus is offended by tattoos and body piercings any more than the clothes we wear and the food we eat. There are, of course, underlying attitudes of our hearts that can be problematic, but all of us are just as likely to have those attitudes as someone who’s covered from head to toe in tattoos. Fortunately, it’s Jesus that gets to judge our hearts, so it’s long past time that we let go of the assumptions we make in judging and excluding others.

By the way, if this guy showed up here on a Sunday morning, what would your assumptions be? Did he arrive on a motorcycle? Is he more of a fist-service guy than a second-service guy? Does he have a family? What kind of family? A job? I’d want to know if he’s still able to talk with all those mouth piercings! The truth is, there’s not much we can really know about the strange people we meet until we really do meet them, listen to their stories, and share in a small part of their lives.

Before Jesus showed up, the apostles would have never even entered the home of a Gentile like Cornelius, let alone share a meal with them. And yet by Acts 10, Peter has not only dined with Gentiles, he’s baptized them! But the matter of including Gentiles was hardly settled among the Jerusalem Jews, who had even more cultural divides to contend with in the Gentile world, such as circumcision and food sacrificed to idols. We’ll see how the Holy Spirit manages those obstacles in a few weeks.

Your challenge this week is to learn something about a different culture and/or spend time with someone very different than yourself. There are so many judgments that we make without thinking about them, so many assumptions about the superiority of the way we like to live. Open your heart and your eyes this week. Let the Holy Spirit expand your horizons as you continue to act out the forgiving love of God in a world that often looks different than we do.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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