

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 11:1-18
John 13:31-35

“Invisible Fences”

Last week, in a story that didn't make national headlines but came to me through religious news outlets I follow, the Rev. Betty Rendon, a Lutheran pastor serving a small church in Racine, Wisconsin, was arrested in her home along with her husband and 5 year-old granddaughter, after ICE targeted her family in a raid that stemmed back to 2008, when Rev. Rendon and her family were ordered removed from the country. Rev. Rendon and her family have been living in the US since 2004, when they fled Colombia due to violent conflict in her neighborhood. Guerillas attacked a school she was in charge of and assaulted a number of her teachers. Rendon applied for asylum in the US but her request was denied because she lacked an official police report. Rendon, who is active in the ELCA church and was going to start a doctoral program at the Lutheran School of Theology this fall, is being held at the Kenosha Detention Center. On Wednesday, members of her church and the community held an interfaith prayer vigil while holding signs that read “Free Pastor Betty Rendon” and “Who would Jesus deport?”

Rev. Rendon's story brings into sharp focus the strong convictions people have about borders, barriers, and identity. Whether these convictions focus on borders that should be erected or maintained, or on borders that ought to be thrown into the scrap heap of history, any action which challenges those convictions seems guaranteed to get a strong reaction. The pain of trying to discern what God is doing and how we understand the boundaries of our communities and how porous those boundaries are or not is incredibly difficult. As the Lutheran School of Theology said in a statement:

“This incident brings into painful focus the ongoing need to reform this country's (racist, violent, and inhumane) immigration system. We add our

voices to the chorus of prayers and laments offered at this time, and ask for God's mercy and justice to prevail (where human efforts have failed.)"

That statement and Rendon's story couldn't dovetail better with today's reading from Acts in which Peter is struggling with just how porous the boundaries are of the newly formed movement Jesus started. What had once seemed obvious to Peter: that uncircumcised believers – Gentiles -- are outside the boundaries of the Jesus movement; has now changed and so he did what seemed obvious to him and baptized everyone in sight. "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" he asks.

But for the Jerusalem brass, Peter's border-deconstruction seemed reckless. Gentiles, who had different practices and traditions than Israel, had not been included in the Jesus movement up to this point. It was thought that their foreign ways could endanger the clarity of the church's identity, and so the church chose not to include them.

Now in hindsight, seeing as we're all here today (good Gentiles that we are), Peter's action may seem fine with us. But for the Jerusalem's brass his actions were anything but fine. Because back in Peter's day the debates about who was in, and who was out, were as heated then as they are now.

Let me explain . . .

Peter's words about who is he to judge who is worthy of God's acceptance and who is not, conclude the story about Peter and his encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman centurion who was the leader of 100 Roman soldiers. In Peter's day and age, no one was considered more of an outsider to a faithful Jew like Peter than a guy like Cornelius. The two did not make small talk in polite company. It was forbidden by Jewish law. There were clearly defined boundaries between who was acceptable to God and who was not, and Cornelius was not.

But because of a series of visions and dreams, Cornelius and Peter meet. Peter goes to Caesarea at the request of Cornelius because Cornelius has had a vision that instructs him to send for Peter. Well, at the same time Cornelius is having his vision, Peter's having one of his own, in which he is

told not to call profane anything God makes clean. And no sooner does his vision come to an end than Cornelius' Italian Cohort show up at his door asking him to come to dinner.

Now, if it hadn't of been for Peter's vision in which God tells him that it's not up to him to decide what's kosher and what's not, Peter would not have eaten dinner with those men, because it was unlawful for a Jew to eat with a Gentile. But Peter, having had that vision of God telling him that, "You know what Peter, I'm going to call the shots on what's kosher and what's not," Peter decides that it's OK to eat at Cornelius' house.

Now, if the story had ended there, it would have been fine and good and everyone would have made nice small talk over dinner, which was certainly leaps and bounds ahead of where they were at the beginning of chapter 10. But in that story, at the end of dinner, Peter declares to Cornelius and his entourage that God shows no partiality. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality," Peter states.

That is a very bold statement for Peter to make, because up until now he has believed that God shows partiality, that God plays favorites. His religion and scriptures and laws were a major reason he felt that way. But over the course of time, he began to see things differently. Why? Because he met people like Cornelius and because he remembered what Jesus had taught him. But also because the Holy Spirit kept nudging him along, poking and prodding at him and working in a powerful way to transform his thoughts and actions and beliefs. And when Peter finally woke up to the Spirit's prodding, he realized he couldn't sit back any longer with his old, tired assumptions and prejudices. He needed to do something different, he needed to take a stand and declare to everyone who was gathered there that he had changed his mind because life experiences and the Holy Spirit told him it was time.

After Peter baptizes Cornelius, he has to go to Jerusalem and defend himself in front of the church leaders. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them," they demand to know. And Peter explains to them his visions and what he saw in them and concludes by saying, "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

I wonder, where in our world and our country and community today do we hinder God? In what ways do we hinder God's activity?

Peter's statements in this story are a big contrast to many of the religions and many strands of Christianity around today where God is constantly assumed to be on someone's side. People are very good and very adept at claiming that God is on their side. We hear this from politicians; we hear it from political parties; from people promoting their social cause or speaking against one; and even from nations who just know God is on *their side*. But when we do that, and I believe that people on all sides do it—liberals and conservatives—we hinder God's activity and we close ourselves off to what the Holy Spirit might be teaching us today. Rather than being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, we circle the wagons, proclaiming that we know who is in and who is out, we know what's right and what's wrong, or we know what God really wants or doesn't want. Peter circled the wagons; the leaders in Jerusalem circled the wagons; the Romans circled the wagons. But the Spirit kept pushing them and working through them despite their resistance to transform them and their communities. And because of that, the boundaries of the inner circle kept widening to the point that the assumed boundaries were no longer legitimate. Christianity moved in a way no one ever expected, especially Peter. What Peter did changed the course of Christianity forever. He opened this new religion to the whole world. None of us would be here if Peter and Cornelius had closed their minds to the movement of the Spirit.

When Peter declared, "God shows no partiality," he opened the possibility that anyone—everyone—is welcome in the family of faith. But he also put us on warning: who are we to hinder God? Who are we to withhold the water for baptism? Who are we to stand in the way of God's love? (Rev. David Lewicki, www.odysseynetworks.org, "Holy Calamity")

At the end of his life, Jesus commanded the disciples to love one another just as he had loved them. Love one another, he said, love one another. He tells them this in John's Gospel, the part we heard earlier.

For John, love isn't something that we feel; love is something we do. Love is an action, not a feeling. Which means we love one another when we treat other people fairly, as equals. Love is something we enact when we

emulate Jesus' actions. Love is something we embody when we allow the Spirit to move in and through us and our communities, breaking down the barriers and boundaries that divide us. This love Jesus commands doesn't mean we need to approve, condone, understand or even like the other person or his or her actions, but it is a love that says we'll treat another person fairly and as we would like to be treated.

I suspect when Peter was having misgivings about meeting and eating with Cornelius, those final words of Jesus played in his head. "Love one another as I have loved you." I have no way of knowing that, of course, but I have a hunch Peter remembered those words and maybe in that decisive moment of telling Cornelius and his cohort to stay or go, those words came to him and he asked himself, "What would Jesus do?" And decided that Jesus would have opened the door, and invited them in, and broke bread with them. Because in all those years of following him, he never once saw him say, "You're not worthy." Or, "I can't eat with you, that's not allowed." No, in all those years, Peter never once heard Jesus say those things. In fact, Peter saw Jesus eat with some of the lowest of the low, some real-riff. So, I imagine in that split second, when he had to make up his mind about eating with Cornelius or not, Peter decided, "If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me."

And because of that, we are here. We, too, have been invited to the table. God accepts us Gentiles for who we are.

And so I ask you to consider today the matters your mind is closed to. And where might the Spirit be leading you? Because it's easy to sit back comfortably with one's assumptions and convictions. What's harder is to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to transform us into the people God calls us to be.

Amen.

Sources:

Rev. David Lewicki, www.odysseynetworks.org, "Holy Calamity"

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, commentary on Acts 10:44-48

