

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Learning to Neighbor in a Different World

Acts 11:1-18 Rev. Tyler Amundson May **19** 2019
Genesis 32:22-32

A long time ago, far from here there was an old woman who used to sit at the gates of a city. She would watch travelers passing through, and from occasionally engage them to hear their stories.

On a day not unlike this one, a traveler came strolling toward the gate. He looked tired as if he had traveled a very great distance since last seeing a place of rest. “May I bother you?” he asked the old woman, “I am looking for a place to stop for a time, and I am hoping you can tell me what the people of this town are like.”

The woman responded with a smile, “You look like you have journeyed for a long time. You must be tired. Where do you come from?”

He responded, “Mychester”

“Really,” she responded, “And what are the people like in Mychester?”

“Wretched and mean he responded. They do not care if you are safe, fed, or healthy. They will walk by you and ignore you. All of them are the extreme of unfriendly.”

“Oh dear,” replied the woman, “Well the people here are just like that.”

The traveler was saddened and disheartened by the news, “Well, I would rather move on to the next town then.”

A while later another traveler came along.

“May I bother you?” he asked the old woman, “I am looking for a place to stop for time, and I am hoping you can tell me what the people of this town are like.”

The woman responded with a smile, “You look like you have journeyed for a long time. You must be tired. Where do you come from?”

He responded, “Mychester”

“Really,” she responded, “And what are the people like in Mychester?”

“Kind beyond belief. They would share their coat to save their neighbor from cold. They always share their food. The nicest people you could know.”

“Well,” replied the woman, “the people here are just like that. I am sure you will find a warm welcome in this city. The people here are just like those in Mychester.”¹

Last week in our sermon we learned a little about offering new life to people. We learned the steps Peter took to offer resurrection to someone were: Prayer, saying their name and then offering them our hand to help lift them up. Today as we continue to explore how to be a good neighbor, we are going to explore our biblical call of neighboring more deeply by looking at the scripture that followed the one in Acts about resurrection and by diving back into one of the great origin stories of Jesus’ faith tradition.

First, we find ourselves in Acts immediately after Peter has raised a woman from death. We find ourselves learning about Peter’s dream in which he has been called not to just share the good news of Christ with Jews, but with gentiles, all people of any background of faith. Let me

¹ Adapted from - Silf, M. (2003). *One hundred wisdom stories from around the world*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press. Pg 124

remind you that this is a scandal during this time in the church. Peter and the others have felt that Jesus' message is one for only Jewish people, but suddenly something happens and others start sharing that message outside the Jewish community. The good news of Christ escapes from the initial family and neighbors now are to be sought as family in Christ's body of faith.

Acts 11:1-18 Common English Bible (CEB)

11 The apostles and the brothers and sisters throughout Judea heard that even the Gentiles had welcomed God's word. ² When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him. ³ They accused him, "You went into the home of the uncircumcised and ate with them!"

⁴ Step-by-step, Peter explained what had happened. ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying when I had a visionary experience. In my vision, I saw something like a large linen sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. It came all the way down to me. ⁶ As I stared at it, wondering what it was, I saw four-legged animals—including wild beasts—as well as reptiles and wild birds. ⁷ I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!' ⁸ I responded, 'Absolutely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ The voice from heaven spoke a second time, 'Never consider unclean what God has made pure.' ¹⁰ This happened three times, then everything was pulled back into heaven. ¹¹ At that moment three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them even though they were Gentiles. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered that man's house. ¹³ He reported to us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and summon Simon, who is known as Peter. ¹⁴ He will tell you how you and your entire household can be saved.' ¹⁵ When I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as the Spirit fell on us in the beginning. ¹⁶ I remembered the Lord's words: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God's way?"

¹⁸ Once the apostles and other believers heard this, they calmed down. They praised God and concluded, “So then God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life.”

The scandal this story must have brought in the new community of faith. “Peter had a dream, is a load of hullabaloo.” Was surely heard at the local gathering place the next day. “We are trying to get this new thing off the ground, and here goes Peter changing the rules on us.” The criticism would have run thick, and yet Peter persisted to push beyond it and remind people that God offered a dream where the Holy Spirit, God’s very blessing of sacred covenant and new life descended on gentiles, the others, just as it descended on the Jesus’ own selected disciples.

Neighboring just got harder, I want us to hear what is going on here. God can change the rules on us, in the middle of the process. God through working in us to have new understanding can remind us of who God’s children are and God may even draw the circle of neighbors wider than we originally thought.

In the 1960s, we learned that the understanding of neighbor had not grown as wide as it should have by that time in American history. We only learned of this when we heard Martin Luther King Jr. share a vision of a future where all our children would have a chance to grow in their lives together, equally. We began to understand how much race pervaded our country, and that it pervades even now is the troubling piece.

During the midst of this, a Presbyterian minister, decided to take a risk with his congregation. He decided to preach a controversial sermon. So, one day he invited a friend to join him at his pulpit and he shared a story with his congregation along with his friend. During the same time that one of the most segregated controversies keeping people with black skin separate from white people was in swimming pools in the south.

Here let me share with you a piece of that message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7bYNJPfzaU>

Francois Clemmons would play a regular character on Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, and be the first African American to be a regular character on a nationally televised children's show. Fred Roger's took a risk, to make sure the world knew the vision of who received God's Holy Spirit in his understanding.

We can know this because Francois shares the following story:

One day he was watching Mr. Roger's neighborhood on set as it was being filmed. At the end of every program Fred Rogers says, "Every day is a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are."

That day as he said the closing line Francois Clemmons saw that Fred Roger's was watching him the whole time. Afterwards Fred walked up to Fracois Clemmons and Francois said, "Fred were you talking to me." To which Fred Roger's responded, "Yes,I have been talking to you for years, but you heard me today."²

Like Peter, I think Fred Roger's had the clarity of knowing who he was to pray with, say their name, and then help them up. Fred Roger's new how to create a neighborhood using the powers shown to us in the resurrected Christ, and to remind us that we are inextricably connected to one another.

This brings me to the second scripture we are studying for today. Genesis 32 encircles one of the foundational stories of our faith. It is the

² <https://storycorps.org/podcast/storycorps-462-in-the-neighborhood/>

night in which Jacob wrestles an unknown figure and is blessed as Israel. This summer we will be studying how to read the Bible, and for some pre-knowledge this is what it is known as an origin story. These are the stories that help us understand who we are as a people of God. Remember Jacob is one of the progenitors of the Jewish faith and the people of Israel. His story is not just about an individual, it is about how a people wrestle with God, get blessed, and receive their name.

Genesis 32:22-32 Common English Bible (CEB)

²² Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. ²³ He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. ²⁴ But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. ²⁵ When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

²⁷ He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won."

²⁹ Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name."

But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. ³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." ³¹ The sun rose as Jacob passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh. ³² Therefore, Israelites don't eat the tendon attached to the thigh muscle to this day, because he grabbed Jacob's thigh muscle at the tendon.

As we talk about neighboring this story goes right along with Peter's story because they are both origin stories. They remind us who we are.

In this story we learn that God invites us to wrestle when we struggle to understand who God is, what God wants us to do. For me it is the clear vision of what Peter has gone through in our earlier scripture. Do you think Peter just had a dream and magically believed everyone should receive the Holy Spirit, I don't. Instead I believe Peter wrestled to understand the dream's meaning, and struggled to understand the change. This second scripture did the same thing for people in Israel, because it seems for a moment as though God lost God's power, God got caught by a mortal. God isn't supposed to be catchable by us mortals, at least that's what many believe. Yet, God is caught and wrestled and Jacob gets him in a place where God seems trapped.

Walter Brueggemann one of my favorite scriptural scholars says this:

“Israel is the one who has face God... and prevailed, gained a blessing, and been renamed. There is something new underway here about the weakness of God and the strength of Israel. The encounter will not permit a neat summary of roles, as though God is strong and Jacob is weak, or as though things are reversed with Jacob strong and God weak. All of that remains unsettled. But new possibilities are open to Israel that have not been available before. In the giving of the blessing, something of the power of God has been entrusted to Israel. Unlike every other relationship in which God rules and humankind obeys, Israel is a newness which has prevailed with God” ([Brueggemann](#), p. 269)ⁱ

Neighboring like this scripture is not a neat summary. We are going to struggle with it, the world is going to change because God is going to change the definitions of who we should neighbor, for us. We need to continue to stay in the business, the calling and the work of resurrection we learned from Peter last week.

Pray, call out the names of those we learn need life, and offer them a hand. This is neighboring, this is our call.

I want to end by highlighting a story I saw in the Gazette this last week.³

This is Alfreda Moses, friends she is 51 years old and she is getting her high school diploma this spring. I want to share her name because she brought me life this last week as I read her story. This mother of 5, and grandmother of 12 live right here in our town and has worked her tail off her whole life. She worked double shifts as a Certified Nursing Assistant before tackling challenging courses after not finishing school in the past.

Here is what I love about Freda's story, she didn't talk about herself. She is a true neighbor, she talked about someone else in her story. This woman who could claim all the credit for a prize many of us take for granted in her speech at graduation credits her inspiration to a young man who made it to class even though his car would always break down.

Alfreda Moses is a neighbor, she is an example of God's Holy Spirit at work, and new life being found in our age.

Friends, the world will change, God will make sure of that, we just need to figure out how to neighbor the ones God invites into our dreams, and how we can offer life to our neighborhoods so more people like Alfreda Moses can succeed. So, we can have a community that we can claim as good and just, and nearly a kingdom like God imagines for us.

Go from this place people of God, and be neighbors.

³ https://billingsgazette.com/news/local/billings-mother-grandmother-on-earning-high-school-diploma-no-matter/article_34f48dd5-ee54-51b0-aa2d-23a7ebef41ea.html?utm_content=buffer145f2&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=LEEDCC+

ⁱ <http://astore.amazon.com/pulpfict-20/detail/0664234372>