

Jonathan Mark  
Reedley FMC  
Acts 10:34-48  
5/9/2021

### What Prevents Union

It is a wonderful thing to preach in front of all of you and that I am still connected to all of you on zoom. This time of transition will be difficult, some of us youngsters are on or about to get our first shot and are in a period of holy waiting. So I want to know each and every one of you that you are loved, you are needed, you are a part of this congregation. We have faced difficult things as a community and in the future we will face difficult things. But that is the purpose of a holy community, gathered together, to be with us in our joys and sorrows.

Still, we know that life is a bit more complicated than that holy ideal. A couple Sundays ago I spoke to you about the other sheep that Jesus is bringing into our sheep fold. And the difficulty of bringing them in. The complications of politics and theology that make following our convictions like walking upstream. This Sunday is a continuation of that sermon and Pastor Caley's sermon. What prevents union, what are the boundaries that stand in the way of all of us treating each other as fellow beloved children of God?

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Truly understand, God shows no partiality, because God is a judge of the living and the dead, and all prophets testify that everyone who is faithful to God will receive forgiveness of sins through God's name. This morning, these words hit me like a sledge hammer. We often hear about how God is impartial, but often when I hear those words I think about how God does not favor one group over another. And that is true, since we are all beloved children of God, from the saintly to the most sinful, all are welcomed into the temple of God's wasteful love. But the impartiality of God is also an assertion that God is a judge, and as a judge, God makes decisions on legal cases. And over the past hundred years we have seen how the decisions made in the courts can overturn laws, can desegregate schools, and can give marriage rights to interracial and same-sex couples.

Not too long ago in Acts, God rules in a court case. He lowers a sheet from heaven, full of pigs, snakes, and owls, all unclean animals. He tells Peter to get up, kill, and eat. Peter retorts, the law says that I cannot eat anything profane. But God says, no, I've made it clean. I've ruled in this court case that the separation wall of communion meals between Jews and Gentiles will be broken down. The Jewish Christian communion table shall be desegregated and Jewish Christians and Gentiles Christians shall eat together. God has ruled in the court case and God has reinterpreted the law.

## Sermon 1

This morning my heart is heavy. My heart is heavy because of how an interpretation of our Bible has separated the church. This week I had a conversation with members of our church about their pain about the church withholding the waters of baptism, so to speak. They told me about their decades-long struggle, how they fear that their beliefs meant they could not find welcome within the Mennonite Church. Their pain over family members feeling like they could not find a church home. How does God rule in their case?

The problem is that a number of our Christian siblings have earnestly tried to interpret the Bible. There are some verses in the Bible, in Leviticus, Romans, 1st Corinthians and 1st Timothy that say that there are some Christians we cannot break bread with. The so-called, clobber texts, because Christians have used these texts of the bible to clobber our LGBTQ siblings in Christ. Our Christian siblings who withhold baptism, often do so out of sincere Christian belief that the Bible is simple and clear on the topic. They are like Peter saying, by no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. But I don't blame them, for they stand not as people, but gatekeepers who must reject the outcast. We are both guilty of going through the motions of what the church expects of us, them in their rejection and me in my indecisive cowardice. How does God rule in their case?

I do not pretend to know the mind of God, but I do know my own heart. I have seen the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out even among the queers. I have heard them speaking truth to power and praising the liberating power of God. I have seen the face of Christ shine on them as they have prayed for their flock, officiated weddings, and proclaimed the Word of God. I am reminded of the Joel passage that proclaims the Holy Spirit being poured out on all flesh, men and women, old and young, slave and free. God has ruled that all flesh is blessed with God's holy Spirit. I stand witness to this truth and this morning so do you.

On May 23rd we're going to have a conversation about what prevents union in our church. I'm sure we'll disagree and some of us will roll their eyes. Peter and the Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem certainly did not see eye to eye on eating with and baptising gentiles. So I invite you into the holy disagreement of the people of God. A disagreement rooted in our authentic and flawed attempt to understand scriptures. A disagreement that begins with the words, you are a beloved child of God, you have worth that goes beyond doctrine and ethics. Peter asks, can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And some may have stood up and voiced their disagreement. And they talked about it, but in the end he ordered that the gentiles be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay and eat with them for several days. May we extend that same peace of Christ to one another.

## Sermon 2