

Gentiles, Women, and Fortune-tellers too! The Church is for ALL

Acts 11:1-18 and Acts 16:9-40

Mother's Day 2019

Dear Katie, Carrie, and Deuce,

This is our first Mother's Day at Park Ridge Community Church. The last time we celebrated Mother's Day in Park Ridge, you twins were not even 1 year old yet! My have things changed since then! Katie, you're about to finish sixth grade and Carrie and Deuce, you're about done with first grade. You are each changing and growing so much every single day. I am so proud of the people you are!

Our church is studying the book of Acts in this season of Easter, and I have to say- reading Acts is pretty exciting! In Bible Study, we read and discuss these scriptures and have experienced a whole range of emotions from admiration and inspiration, to sadness and anger, to outright confusion. In the texts we read today, people are upset with Peter for reaching out to Gentile people. Peter explained that he had a dream where everything he thought he knew was challenged. As a good Jew, he had been preaching to the Jewish diaspora who had gathered in Jerusalem, but God was calling him to go further.

To be honest, I think Peter was confused. He thought Jesus was there to save the people of God, which he understood pretty narrowly as exclusively the people of Israel, or the Jews. He preached and connected the heroes of the Hebrew scriptures, the prophets, King David, and Moses to what God had accomplished through Jesus. Gentiles didn't have those same stories. They didn't know scripture, they weren't circumcised, and therefore, they were not his problem.

Until he had a vision where all of the ritually unclean animals were set before him in a sort of divine picnic. God told Peter that he shouldn't dismiss anyone or anything that God calls clean. When Peter went to the Italian soldier Cornelius's home, the Holy Spirit moved there too, and all were astounded by what God was capable of, including Peter.

Sometimes, my beloved children, people think the things that set them apart from one another are stronger than that which they have in common. Sometimes that seems true because people can be VERY different. However, I caution you. When you meet someone new, take time to look them in the eye, learn their name, ask where they are from and what they do in life. Seek to understand, especially when it seems like you're too different. You may find that that person experiences similar fears, hopes, joys, insecurities, and aspirations. You may also learn that you experience things differently because of your different perspectives.

When Daddy and I were first dating, I really didn't understand racism. I thought everyone was treated equally and assumed it was so. But, daddy got pulled over much more frequently than I did, and he got many more tickets for random things. I believe it was because of his skin color and not because of anything he did differently than other drivers on the road. You, my beautiful children live in a world that does offer privileges to some and not to others because of the color of your skin or the texture of your hair. I promise to walk this road with you, using my privilege and voice to amplify yours while we work for justice together. You see, like Peter, some folks have been trained that difference divides us and that God has divided us, but scripture texts like Acts 10 and 11 remind us that God made each one, and each one of us, even though we are different, are still created in God's image.

But, you know Gentiles weren't the only ones that some people thought were beyond God's reach. In this society, women were often dismissed or overlooked, understood as property rather than individuals of sacred worth. Yet, there's another story in Acts when Paul went on his journey to share about Jesus, and when he reached a place where there was no synagogue, he walked along the river to a place of prayer, where he preached to a group of women. One of those women was named Lydia, and she was really transformed. She was a wealthy woman, being in retail, selling purple cloth, which means she was the cloth dealer to the rich and famous. She offered Paul and his team lodging at her home after she was baptized. Lydia also prayed for Paul and his companions after they were put in jail. Sometimes Paul's words have been used to put women down, and yet, here's a story where he elevated women to an equal status and treated her like a partner in ministry.

I would like to tell you that Katie and Carrie will have equal opportunities as Deuce and that your gender identity won't impact how the world treats you. I do believe we are making progress. After all, I am a Senior Minister. Women have been ordained now for over 63 years in the United Methodist church, longer in other traditions and fewer years in others. I still meet many people who have never met a woman minister before. Just this week, my dentist asked if I worked for my parents at their church. Another woman from the community smiled as we got coffee together as she shared that they leave the coffee for the Pastor, to which I replied that I was the pastor and she smiled and nodded. I think she thought I misunderstood her. Carrie and Katie, I believe that God has created you as strong, smart individuals who can do many things.

As you discern your passions, I hope you will live into those callings, and don't let anyone hold you back. Deuce, that goes for you too, but people may assume loftier places for you than for your sisters. Keep your eyes open to that and do what you can to always be a voice of empowering your sisters, those related to you by blood or not.

The story of the church in Acts is fascinating because it seems that societal norms were disregarded. Not only did Paul work with women, he also prayed and healed an enslaved woman who was a fortune-teller. Releasing her from the demon that gave her powers also meant releasing her from her owners who held her captive. This was good news for the woman, whose life and choices have been stripped from her; however, this was not good news for the wealthy who sought to control her. When Paul and his team were thrown in jail, singing hymns and praying started an earthquake. They didn't leave the jail even when the chains were broken and the doors were opened. They shared life with the jailer who almost killed himself AND instead had himself and his family baptized. When the magistrates released Paul, they went to Lydia's house to continue to worship.

Did you catch all those characters? A demon-possessed, enslaved woman who was a fortune-teller and a jailer for the Romans – both had their lives completely transformed by these strangers who defied the rules that might have kept them apart. Their stations in life might have given them reason to not even listen to Paul. They both must have been scared – the woman lost the thing in her life that she knew, though it controlled her. The soldier had been given orders to keep the prisoners locked up and when the locks were broken, he thought death would be better than failure. Both people had their lives turned upside down, through the healing power of the Holy Spirit. The woman overcame her possession and the soldier overcame his toxic ambition, where his work was his life.

I don't know what your lives hold. However, if substance use and abuse, if mental illness, if physical ailments, if obsession with a love, or ambition in a job...if any of these things begin to take over who you are and you become lost, I pray that the words of someone – me, a family member, a church member, or even a stranger will help guide you back. When we become lost in life, I believe God uses those around us to try and help us find our way home. Sometimes we need help. Community, especially Christian community, can do just that. Just as we promised in your baptism, both your family and the church – we will love, support, pray for, guide you, and be there – come what may. And we meant it.

You would think Paul and his companions would have been scared, after all they were stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail. Yet, they kept on singing and praying. Even when life was frightening, even when they seemed outnumbered, they found strength in prayer, in singing the songs of faith, and resting in community.

Just this week there was another school shooting. In the last ten years, there have been 288 school shootings. My beloved children, the rage and grief that a parent and community feels when the lives of their children are taken from them are unmatched. So far, our politicians haven't found a way to slow down the violence. You children might have to teach us a new way. A way of peace, a way without weapons, a way where difference doesn't divide us but inspires us. We will pray and we will sing, and I hope that God will build us up with strength and boldness – that filled with the Holy Spirit we might go forth to build a better world for you.

Take these lessons to heart. God is still speaking. The Holy Spirit is abundantly present, doing something new – through you, through me, through our church, through our world...God does not discriminate against Gentile or Jew, Woman or Man, Fortune-tellers or Jailers or Politicians or pastors...God's ready to fill us all and use us to build God's kingdom here and now.

I love you forever, I like you for always, as long as I'm living, my babies you'll be.

Mom