The One Where God Goes Camping

Acts 11:1-18

By Rev. Sarah Wolf

What a story! What a tale! What a confusing piece of Scripture…!

Peter’s retelling of his dream kind of sounds a little bit like the incoherent ramblings of a middle schooler trying to recount something exciting that happened in the cafeteria that day —it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, you feel like you had to be there, and you wonder if maybe Peter isn’t embellishing his story a bit. Come on, Peter — a sheet filled with animals? Come on.

What’s happening in this text? What truth is Peter trying to communicate to the apostles and believers in Jerusalem? This text forces us to go back a few chapters in Acts to begin to understand Peter’s dream and why it’s so important for him to share it with his friends.

You see, when today’s text begins, Peter has just returned to Jerusalem after baptizing a Gentile named Cornelius, along with Cornelius’ entire household. God told Peter to go to Cornelius’s house. Upon his arrival there, Peter met Cornelius who Scripture tells us was a “devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” When Peter meets Cornelius, he tells him a brief summary of the Gospel story, telling of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

While Peter was telling his story to Cornelius, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who are listening to Peter. The text tells us that Peter and those he had brought with him were astounded, for they heard them “speaking in tongues and extolling God.” As a result of what could be called a Pentecost for the Gentiles, Peter baptizes Cornelius and his entire household right on the spot. And then he proceeds to stay with them for a few days.

When some of the apostles and the believers who were in Jerusalem heard about the baptisms and Peter’s stay in Caesarea, they were really upset.

For them, they felt that anybody wanting to follow Christ had to have an outward sign of inclusion into the faith, inclusion into special relationship with God. They wanted anyone who was going to join their movement, to have to jump through at least a few hoops.

For them, this was circumcision — a symbolic act that had been around for centuries. The apostles’ big issue was that Peter was offering full inclusion into the Christian faith for Gentiles, without this very important outward sign. Instead of forcing them to comply with the custom, Peter circumvents custom and frankly, the Law, and baptizes Cornelius and his entire household. And then, if that’s not bad enough, Peter further extends a welcome through table fellowship with them after he baptizes Cornelius and his household.

Peter could have just begrudgingly followed God’s command, baptized Cornelius, and then hightailed it back to Jerusalem. Instead, he did the unthinkable — he sat down and broke bread with the Gentiles.

It might seem like it shouldn’t be that big of a deal — this seemingly easy inclusion of Gentiles — but think about something that, for your whole life might have been seen as forbidden or repulsive or just plain wrong.

As I have said before, my dad is from Ohio and he raised my sister and me to be good Ohio State fans. Go Buckeyes. As any good Buckeye fan, my dad taught us from an early age to loath the University of Michigan — that evil university from the state up north. I have heard my dad say numerous times that he just doesn’t understand how someone could be a Michigan fan. It makes no sense to him; it is illogical, unthinkable in his eyes.

In fact, when we went to Detroit as a family during the PCUSA’s General Assembly, we had to beg my dad *not* to wear his Ohio State shirts around the streets of Detroit. In fact, his plan was that not only he but his entire family would parade around downtown Detroit all bedecked in scarlet and gray. Clearly my father believes in outward signs. He might have some sympathy for the early apostles’ criticism.

Maybe there’s something like that for you. Say a rival school in Blacksburg or Charlottesville, or maybe it’s something deeper — a political, theological, or ideological belief. My guess is, we all have someone running through our heads right now — someone with whom you would never associate for one reason or another.

This is just a little bit what it was like for the early apostles. The idea of sharing a meal, of breaking bread, with these uncircumcised Gentiles — was entirely unthinkable; it was shocking. It was forbidden.

It’s interesting to me that these early Christians, the first converts to the Christian faith, would have the same table fellowship issues with Peter that the scribes and Pharisees had with Jesus. “You ate dinner with whom?”

Perhaps Peter recognizes this. Perhaps he sees the similarities between the Pharisees’ criticism and that of the apostles, and he knew he would have to explain his actions through a more familiar method which might be better received —through story-telling.

Story-telling is so important for a people. It’s how we attempt to make sense of the craziness of our world. It’s how we communicate with other cultures and generations those things that we hold dearest. It’s how tell our truths.

When I was an 8th grade language arts teacher, I would often get together with the social studies teacher to see if we could teach units that would complement each other’s curriculum. One obvious unit collaboration for us was when we studied the Holocaust.

You see, it’s one thing to study the history, the facts and figures, the strategic movement of troops and the gradual, but extreme limitation of human rights. But it’s an entirely different thing to *read* someone’s story — to hear the voices of those who were personally targeted and persecuted by Nazi Germany.

The students would come into my classroom fresh from their Social Studies lessons with the basic knowledge of Nazi Germany and Europe during the 30s and 40s, but after reading books like the Diary of Anne Frank or The Book Thief, they left with understanding, with empathy. They left with the voice of Anne Frank echoing in their heads, telling them that in spite of everything, she really did believe that people were good at heart. She told my students her truth.

Peter gets this — the power of story. Peter gets that for the apostles at the beginning of today’s text, the subject is just too close to their hearts. He knows that he’s up against centuries of tradition and teaching. He knows that if he simply tells them, “God wants it this way,” he’s not going to get anywhere. Peter realizes that in order for the people to really hear them, he has to communicate through story.

After all, this is the medium that Jesus frequently used, isn’t it? Often, when someone would ask Jesus about the Kingdom of God or question him on his interpretation of Scripture, he would turn to telling parables to illustrate his point.

Taking a cue from Jesus, Peter does the same. The text reports that Peter tells his story to the apostles step-by-step. He doesn’t leave out any details. Peter uses his bizarre vision of a sheet full of different animals being lowered as an illustration to the apostles of God’s desire for everyone to be included in the Kingdom of God.

One of the most beautiful parts of this passage, is how the apostles and the believers respond to Peter’s story. The text says, “When they heard this, they were silenced.” They heard Peter and his story, and they stopped arguing with him. But it wasn’t a sullen silence. They didn’t sit back and cross their arms in silent disagreement. No, the very next sentences says, “And they praised God.”

And the important thing here is that the person who deserves the praise is God. It’s not Peter — although he should be commended on his listening and following directions skills — It’s God who deserves praise. It’s our God who makes that initial movement toward full inclusion.

And that’s the point here. That is the good news. That it’s God’s decision to decide who to include. And God has made that decision — it’s everyone.

Everyone. Sometime’s that’s hard for us to hear. At least, I know that it’s hard for me to hear. Sometimes when I hear that I am to include everyone, I want to say to God, “Yeah..but….”

Inclusion is hard. It looks simple on paper — God’s decision to include everyone — but in practice it can be much more difficult.

In her book, Pastrix, The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber discusses what inclusion means to her — and to God. She describes inclusion as an act of “extending the tent” so that it covers all.

I love Nadia’s vision of God’s tent because it is deeply Biblical. In the first chapter of John, we get the familiar words, “And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” The word “dwelled” in Greek “σκηνόω” actually means to pitch or live in a tent. In sending Christ, God came down to where we were, to who we were (and still are!), and pitched a tent and lived among us in all of our sin and trauma and eccentricities.

Nadia Bolz Weber takes this image of God’s tent and expands it.

She says that as Christians, we’ve got a long history of deciding who gets to be under the tent. First, like in today’s text, we included the Gentiles, then later on women, and now perhaps it’s members of the LGBTQ community. She points out though, that while we might feel like we’re doing a great job of extending the tent to include others, it’s not really our tent to extend in the first place.

I want to pause to acknowledge that Nadia Bolz Weber is unapologetically liberal — both theologically and politically. Anyone who has read her books or seen her talk learns quickly that Nadia does not hold her opinions back. But, while Nadia certainly is critical of others, she is often most critical of herself.

Nadia writes,

“If the quality of my Christianity lies in my ability to be more inclusive than the next pastor, things get tricky because I will always, always encounter people— whom I don’t want in the tent with me. Always. I only really want to be inclusive of some kinds of people and not of others.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Nadia is pointing out her own failings around inclusion. In this section of her book, she goes quickly on one page in which she applauds the inclusive acts of her congregation to the next in which she quickly realizes that maybe all *doesn’t* mean all for her — if she’s going to work hard to include the LGBTQ community — an act that seems perfectly natural to her — then she has to work just as hard — if not harder — to include everyone else.

In her typical snarky fashion, Nadia Bolz Weber offers us her list of people she feels God requires her to include. But she isn’t sure she really would include them if she had the choice. Those are the people for whom inclusion for her is a real struggle.

Who is on your list? Who do you struggle to invite in? I sure know who is on mine.

This tent metaphor assumes that we are always on the inside of the tent, safe from the elements, deciding who gets invited under. But for someone else in this world, I am on the outside. I have probably ostracized someone, hurt them deeply, harmed them in some way, that for them, it is a struggle to include me under their tent.

At the end of his story-telling, Peter asks the most important question, “Who am I to hinder God?” Who are Peter — Nadia Bolz Weber — you, or me — to stand in God’s way — to decide who is included, and who isn’t? To decide who God loves?

Only God gets to make that decision.

Remember today’s text, friends. Just as Peter demonstrates to the apostles that it was God’s call to include and love the Gentiles, and not Peter’s call, we would also do well to remember that no matter where we find ourselves in relation to this tent of inclusion, it is not our tent in the first place. It is God’s. It is God’s initiative to extend the tent. And God already has.

The apostles, while they’re praising God at the end of this story exclaim, “Then God has given *even to the Gentiles* the repentance that leads to life.” Even to THEM.

And isn’t it wonderful that God makes room in that tent even for us — even to Southerners, Virginians, Michigan fans, Republicans, Democrats, Presbyterians, even baptists like Temple?

Thanks be to God that there is room for us….*even us*….under God’s tent.

May we live our lives in gratitude for such inclusion.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Bolz-Weber, Nadia (2013-09-10). Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint (p. 91). FaithWords. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)