

“Always Room for One More”

The 6th Sunday of Easter, 25 May 2019
Memorial Day

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Matt Matthews
Acts 11:1-18

There's a great Scottish tale about Lachie MacLachlan and his wife and their ten children who live in a small, cramped, little house. What I love about this big-hearted man living in his tiny house, is that he always, always, always makes room in his home for travelers on the road. The tinker, the tailor, the shepherd lass and his dog . . . There's always room for one more.

If the night is rainy, Lachie will turn no one away.

If the crowd is too large, a platoon of local soldiers, say, or a band of musicians, Lachie makes room for them.

When every guest comes, he says, “There's always room for one more.”

What happens when all of his guests have a dance and the dance gets bigger and bigger? There's always room for one more, of course. And what happens when the party gets out of hand and the walls of the tiny house bulge out and in, and the house falls down? The townsfolk build Lachie, his wife, and their ten children a larger house.

What I love about Lachie is that there's always room for one more in his house, and, of course, that attitude has nothing to do with square footage or bricks and mortar. It has everything to do with how big his flesh-and-blood heart is. Thank God, Lachie's heart is big.

Lachie is the Christ figure of this Scottish folk tale. His welcome extends to everyone, and his hospitality is open for all. “Come unto me *all you* who labor and are heavily burdened,” Jesus would say.

In Lachie's language, what Jesus is saying is, “There's always room for one more.”

* * *

Peter had been mixing with the wrong crowd. He had been spending time with uncircumcised Gentile Christians, that is, they were non-Jews who were Jesus followers. The Jewish-Christians, of which Peter and the disciples were a part, didn't understand why Peter seemed to be breaking ranks with them. Why are you including the excluded? Why are you eating with those who eat the “wrong” foods? These gentiles are not ‘our people’?

The Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem were telling Peter, "There's never room for one more," certainly not for those who are so far outside of the fold.

Peter is patient with the insider, Jewish-Christians.

He takes them through his discernment step by step.

First there's the vision of unclean food being lowered from heaven on a table cloth. God tells Peter to eat it, but Peter refuses because all of the food was what he of Jewish descent had been taught was 'unclean.'

It happens three times. Peter says I can't eat this, Lord. This food is unclean. Is this a test?

God says, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

God is at work turning Peter's world upside down.

Then, explains to the Jewish-Christians, the Spirit led Peter to the home of a Gentile. Peter preaches and the Spirit falls upon all of them, Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider.

Peter explains to the Jewish-Christians, ¹⁷If God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

* * *

We hinder God when we exclude others. The Jewish-Christians thought the church was to be a closed group of people with Jewish roots, who followed Jewish dietary laws, who subscribed to long-held Jewish practices, like circumcision. The Jewish-Christians were doing their best, attempting to be true to Jesus, who was, after all, a practicing Jew.

But Peter patiently tells them that Jesus makes all things new and God's Spirit has led him to know that God so loved the whole world he sent Jesus, and so nobody, nobody, nobody can be left out of the circle.

Peter was the first disciple to teach inclusion and to extend a wide, wide welcome to a hungry, hurting world. We hinder God when we keep the doors to the feast locked. We hinder God when the traveler comes by and we say, We do not have room for you, neither in our house nor in our hearts.

* * *

Jim Wallis of Sojourners magazine spoke of the late Rachel Held Evans as one who created a wide, safe place for people who had never felt welcomed by the church.

Mrs. Evans grew up in a conservative Christian household and town. She went to a conservative Christian college. She had been taught that to be a 'Christian' meant that the walls were high and who was in and who was out, mainly out, was very clear.

As she grew up and grew in the faith, she found that the faith of her younger years was falling apart. As she read and studied the Bible she began to interpret it differently. She began to see Christ as one who demonstrated radical and wide hospitality to all people. The church, she began to learn, was a place for Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians, for circumcised and uncircumcised. Jesus' church welcomed all comers, not just the ones who knew the secret handshake.

Wallis writes that "many people have testified that Rachel Held Evans created a safe place for them — in person, for some, but overwhelmingly online, with a blog that became an internet sanctuary where people were welcomed, affirmed, encouraged, and lifted up. They are speaking up . . . in deep gratitude for her legacy of inclusion and advocacy to bring diverse voices to the table: championing women, especially women of color, and LGBTQ people."

Somewhere along the way, Rachel Held Evans must have been welcomed in by Lachie MacLachlan. Rachel Held Evans may have heard Peter preach, may have seen the fire in his eyes. Somewhere along the way, Rachel Held Evans got wind of the truth that Jesus stretched out his arms to all people, the whole wide world.

Her wide welcome makes me wonder when and how do I "hinder" God by putting up walls around my religion? How do I extend a welcome to some, but not all?

* * *

After Peter shared his story with the Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem, they, too, were convinced that including Gentiles was right and good. But relations with Gentile Christians would take time. Are we Jewish-Christians allowed to eat like the Gentiles? Are they required to eat like us? They were going to have to get to know each other. They were going to have to find ways to respect each other in their differences. There were differences and squabbles that would need to be teased out and reconciled.

But they would manage, because what united the disparate members of the early church was greater than all their differences of opinion and tradition.

And there would always be people like Peter, like Paul, like Francis, like Augustine, like Bonhoeffer, like Romero, like Theresa, like Martin Luther King, Jr., like Tutu, like Rachel Held Evans, like John Muirhead, like John Gartzke, like Joe Grant, like Leeland Andrews, like Lachie MacLachlan, like me or you, always reminding everybody in the early church and beyond the early church—*There's always room for one more.*

AMEN.

An Affirmation of Faith
Adapted from the Confession of 1967

To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as his reconciling community.

Help us, LORD.

This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares God's labor of healing the enmities which separate men and women from God and from each other.

Heal us, LORD. And use us as healers in Your holy name.

Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Help us to hear Your call, Lord Christ.

The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.

Make us all one people united in Your Spirit.

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church's mission.

Guide our steps, LORD.

Christ's life as a man involves the church in the common life of all people. God's service to humanity commits the church to work for every form of human well-being.

Grant us courage to be Your hands and feet, O LORD.

God's suffering makes the church sensitive to all the sufferings of humankind so that it sees the face of Christ in the faces of men and women in every kind of need.

LORD, forgive us for not recognizing You in the face of others.

God's crucifixion discloses to the church God's judgment on humankind's inhumanity and to the awful consequences of its own complicity in injustice.

Save us from our sin, LORD.

In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming, the church sees the promise of God's renewal of humanity in society and of God's victory over all wrong.

Alleluia!

The church follows this pattern in the form of its life and in the method of its action. So, to live and serve is to confess Christ as Lord.

**O LORD, use both our words *and* our actions to bear Your love to the world.
Make us one in Jesus Christ.**