

7-11-21 Sermon, “How Can I Help?”

Born into a royal family of the Xhosa-speaking Thembu tribe, Nelson Mandela grew up hearing stories of his ancestors’ struggles during the wars of resistance to colonialism and his eyes were opened to the inequality of life in South Africa. Inspired to contribute to the fight for his people’s freedom, Mandela renounced his claim to the Thembu chieftanship to become a lawyer. He joined the African National Congress, a black liberation group, while in law school in 1943. He and fellow ANC leader Oliver Tambo would go on to establish South Africa’s first Black law practice in 1952, specializing in cases resulting from the apartheid policy implemented by the extremist National Party, which had come to power several years prior. In that same year, Mandela was chosen as the National Volunteer-in-Chief of the “Defiance Campaign,” and he began traveling throughout the country in order to build support for nonviolent means of protest against apartheid legislation. His activism made him a frequent target of the authorities and he was arrested multiple times. In 1959, after police opened fire on peaceful Black protesters in the township of Sharpeville, killing 69, panic, anger, and riots swept the country and the apartheid government banned the ANC. Mandela came to believe that armed struggle would be inevitable, and in 1963, after returning from having secretly left the country to participate in guerrilla warfare training, he was arrested. In what came to be known as the Rivonia trial, Mandela was handed a life

sentence in an attempt to silence him. Though Mandela retained widespread support among South Africa's Black population throughout his imprisonment, the dominant apartheid government continued to enforce its oppressive policies while resistance and violence grew. Under the National Party's white supremacist leadership, Black South Africans were subject to heavily restrictive housing, voting, economic, employment, education, and sexual policies that kept them segregated and without any sense of agency. Meanwhile, Mandela was kept in inhumane conditions in maximum security facilities for the first eighteen years of his incarceration, and there were no sincere attempts by those in power to engage him in dialogue.

In today's scripture, our two main characters sit on opposite ends of the power spectrum and it might be expected that they'd hold discriminatory views toward each other. Cornelius embodies Roman imperial power. He lives in Caesarea, which, as the administrative and military capital of Palestine, serves as the headquarters of the Roman occupation. He comes from Italy, the seat of the empire. He is a slave-owner, and as a centurion, not only is he a soldier for the occupying power, but he is also in charge of many others who suppress the populace. And in addition to representing the dominance of the Roman empire, Cornelius is also the ultimate "other" for the early Jesus-following community – a Gentile. Cornelius was a common gentile name, and Caesarea was known to be an ungodly and lascivious city overrun by Gentiles – a heathen, pagan,

idol-worshipping, and profane place. Peter, on the other hand, is a leader of the Jesus followers who will come to be persecuted under the Romans – Peter himself will be imprisoned and eventually killed at their hands. And being Jewish, Peter knows that he is not to come into contact with Gentiles.

We might expect that both of these characters would hold biases that would keep them from associating with each other. However, Cornelius is a God-fearing and generous man – and even though he is entrenched in the structures of the oppressive empire, he is open to new perspectives and new ways of being. And Peter, who might ordinarily exclude Cornelius and his men from even a conversation, has a rooftop experience that changes everything...

In our modern consumer society, we live with the absolute commodification of animals. For many of us, animals are for the most part utility, natural resources, and sites of consumption. But the old way of viewing animals bound them to us as extensions of family, faith, memory, and body. We lived knowing that we lived with them, in relationships that we saw as mutual, reciprocal, and joined. In Peter's vision, for God to suggest that Peter "kill and eat" animals associated with a people was to urge him to move into their space of living and *participate* in the building of community – to move beyond his bias and

understand that God is always drawing the circle of God's inclusive love ever wider.

This story is centered on invitation into relationship and listening – acts of love that build bridges and form deep connections. Both Cornelius and Peter cross cultural boundaries to essentially ask each other, “How can I help?” The part of the story we miss in today's reading is that after Peter's vision and at the command of the Spirit, even though associating with Gentiles could be considered an act of defilement, Peter welcomes the men Cornelius has sent to find him and essentially asks them, “How can I help?” They tell him of Cornelius' vision and, in a move that shows Peter understands that God has made all people clean in God's own image, Peter actively listens to what they have to say and then invites them to stay with him before going on with them to see Cornelius. Cornelius, a privileged man of empire, not only invites Peter into his home, but in front of his relatives and friends he relinquishes his own privilege and power as he falls at Peter's feet and asks how he can help Peter's story be heard. After explaining that he now knows that God's love reaches out to all, Peter shares the gospel message. Cornelius and Peter's reciprocal invitations into relationship and their willingness to listen to each other sets the stage for what happens next – their shared space opens up and becomes available to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The entire gathered crowd that hears Peter's word receives the Holy Spirit and is transformed, and as the first Gentile conversion, this

might be seen as the tipping point of the gospel story. As Peter explains to his Jewish friends in Jerusalem in the following chapter, the Spirit told him to make no distinction between *them* and *us*. The Jesus followers begin to understand that there is no “other” in the eyes of God, but that all are equally necessary and beloved, interdependent children of God. From here, they move forward unhindered in building up the body of Christ, bringing Christ’s love to the ends of the known earth and changing the world. **Peter and Cornelius show us that when we shed our biases and actively listen to diverse perspectives, we open ourselves up to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, and this can spark movements that change the world.**

It’s not surprising that invitation into relationship and active listening are known to be extremely important principles in the process of community building. Peter Block is an author, consultant, and speaker in the areas of organization development, community building, and civic engagement. In his 2008 book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, he argues, “Listening is the action step that replaces defending ourselves. Listening, understanding at a deeper level than is being expressed, is the action that creates a restorative community.” Dr. Sylvia Bettez is a professor at UNC-Greensboro whose scholarship focuses on fostering critical community building and promoting equity through intercultural communication and engagement. She agrees that active listening is a primary component in building critical communities, and a skill that

requires *reciprocity*, as both the listener and the speaker can learn in the process of engagement. She defines critical communities as dynamic, “interconnected, porously bordered, shifting webs of people who through dialogue, active listening, and critical question posing, assist each other in critically thinking through issues of power, oppression, and privilege.” I don’t know about you, but to me, that sounds an awful lot like a description of the early Jesus-following community and a model of what the modern church could be. Dr. Bettez suggests several additional strategies that are helpful for building critical communities, including:

- invitation into relationship with the *conscientious effort to be welcoming and hospitable*
- conscientious effort to operate with an attitude of *openness and inclusivity*
- recognizing the importance of and *seeking out dialogues across lines of cultural difference*

Ultimately, says Dr. Bettez, “critical community building requires us to be patient and hopeful while trusting that engagement, rather than self-centeredness, indeed changes the world around us.” If we want to better serve our communities and work toward *beloved* community, it’s necessary to engage with, listen to, and center marginalized voices so we can truly understand how we can help work toward lasting change for all.

In the 1980s, with the political situation in South Africa deteriorating and international pressure increasing, the pro-apartheid government finally saw the value in inviting Nelson Mandela into the conversation. Having come to realize that continuing to systemically oppress a large segment of the population was unsustainable, leaders of the National Party began talks with Mandela to ask how they could help the country move forward together. Rather than seeking vengeance, Mandela called for calm and reconciliation, advocating for a free and democratic government, under which he said there would be no need for violence and the possibility would exist of a better life for all. His philosophy was guided by the ideal of *ubuntu*, an African concept relating to the oneness of humanity. It can be translated many ways, but it implies an understanding of self-realization in terms of interdependent communal relationships, roughly meaning, “I am because you are,” or “I am because we are.” **It means that to become more fully ourselves is to enter more and more deeply into community with others.**

In 1989, National Party politician Frederik Willem de Klerk came to power as South Africa’s president and committed to dismantling the apartheid system. He released Mandela from prison in 1991 and in the face of continued political instability and violence, the two conducted ongoing negotiations that would earn them both the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and lead to South Africa’s first non-racial, democratic election in

1994. Mandela was elected as the country's first Black president and de Klerk took the post of second deputy president in South Africa's new Government of National Unity. The anniversary of the elections, April 27th, is now celebrated as a public holiday known as Freedom Day. In inviting each other into relationship and truly listening, Mandela and de Klerk overcame hate and fear and committed to a more loving and inclusive way in a movement that changed the world.

We know from our experience here at Greystone how important it is to be in relationship with and truly listen to the diverse perspectives of those with whom we build community. Hopefully many of you felt the Holy Spirit moving last week when we had our "Conversation Church" service and learned something valuable about your neighbors and maybe even yourselves that you hadn't considered before. And when we build critical community as a church, it empowers us to go out into the world and do the same. Several of our members have had the opportunity to do this as volunteers for Together for Hope, a rural development coalition that was formed in 2001 as an outgrowth of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Rural Poverty Initiative; it started a 20-year commitment to the 20 poorest counties in the United States. This network of organizations focuses on building relationships with the people who live in the communities they serve. As part of Together for Hope's yearly, 2-week long "All Church Challenge," local and outside volunteers are empowered to help fuel community interaction and

growth in Phillips County, Arkansas. A small group of our Greystone members has typically taken part each year, where they've had the opportunity to be in relationship with the community members and learn from them directly about how they can help. When Together for Hope first began its work in this community, they found that one of its needs was access to swimming lessons for Black families. Situated on the Mississippi River, there are many oxbow lakes in the area – these are small, U-shaped lakes that form when a wide meander of a river is cut off – and the only pool in the community had been closed down. Over the years, Together for Hope worked to help get the pool operational, and now volunteers help lead summer camps and teach swimming lessons at the pool. This has been a life-changing initiative for the community, as many of the former campers now work at the camp as counselors and as lifeguards at the pool. Volunteers have also helped with home repairs, construction efforts, and providing reading libraries for Black daycare centers since, unfortunately, Black families do not feel particularly welcome in the community's public libraries. There is, of course, always more work to be done, but it's pretty clear that through relationship, open dialogue, and actively listening to diverse perspectives, this community has come to experience sustainable change for the better.

As we continue to ask questions that lead to courageous conversations, let us remember that the interdependent world is shifted through

invitation. In the spirit of Cornelius and Peter and in the spirit of *ubuntu*, let's continue to invite and welcome those whom we may have left out of the conversation and center the voices of those who are so often marginalized – our Black and brown siblings, our Asian siblings, our Jewish siblings, our Muslim siblings, our LGBTQ siblings... “I am because we are,” and community will be created the moment we decide to act as creators of what it can become. So, let's remember that, as Peter tells us, there is no *us* and no *them*, and let's do our best to let go of our privilege and biases as we offer Christ's love by continuing to invite, welcome, and listen – we might just change the world.

Benediction

May the welcoming God of invitation keep our hearts open,
May the love of Christ connect us and inspire in us the holy curiosity to listen deeply,
And may the Holy Spirit move us to cocreate a more loving and inclusive world.
Amen.