



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Actor, Ally or Accomplice?

Part 1

God plays no favorites

Selected verses from Acts 10

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Once upon a time, in a community not too far from here, a group of unknown teenagers trashed and destroyed a Jewish family's menorah display at the holidays. The shocked and embarrassed community responded by asking families of other faiths to show their support of the Jewish family by displaying menorahs also. The response was overwhelming as menorahs decorated all of the neighborhood homes. The Jewish family was pleasantly surprised by the love and care shown by the solidarity of the interfaith community when they "stood with them" against violence and hate.

Some 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a movement, including religious people, including some people in this very room, against the ugly hatred and reality of racial discrimination in the U.S., and even right here in our own neighborhoods. Many of the overt examples of discrimination came to an end. "Whites Only" drinking fountains, restaurants, and motels basically disappeared. Segregated buses and trains became integrated. Equal opportunity slogans became popular in businesses. And white supremacy groups, such as the KKK seemed to be losing power.

However, just when it seems that equality might be within reach, we are reminded that maybe things aren't as good as they seem. In fact, maybe they are even worse. Just a little over one year ago we came face-to-face with the horrors and hate displayed in Charlottesville. Such acts remind us that bigotry is alive and well. Even when we planned this series of sermons last year, we didn't know what would transpire between then and now. Little did we foresee the shock of parents being separated from their children, even very young children, as young as 8 months old, over 500 of whom have not yet been reunited. And even more personally, we didn't know fully the discrimination that our district would impose on congregations and on our LGBTQ

2 sisters and brothers, through policies meant to exclude some of our church family from full congregational life.

And so this morning, we have the first of three sermons on anti-bigotry. This is more timely than we could ever have guessed. Last year we did an anti-racism series and this year we broaden it, noting that hate and intolerance include but are certainly not limited to the color of skin.

Bigotry has been defined as prejudice against any identifiable minority or disadvantaged population based on things such as

- Race (racism)
- Nationality
- Ethnicity (antisemitism, etc.)
- Religion (islamophobia, etc.)
- Gender (sexism)
- Age (ageism)
- And sexual orientation (homophobia)

Hatred and discrimination and prejudice are present at every level of society, from personal interactions to oppressive systems to organized hate groups.

The Southern Poverty Law Center is the premier U.S. organization monitoring the activities of domestic hate groups and other extremists. They publish investigative reports, train law enforcement officers, share key intelligence, and offer expert analysis to the media and public. They are currently watching 1,600 extremist groups operating across the country, 36 of which are right here in Pennsylvania. They vary from active chapters of the KKK to the Holocaust Denial committee to the Reformation-Bible Puritan-Baptist

Church/Vatican Assassins Group in Newmanstown, Pennsylvania, which listed as a general “hate group”. And then there’s the H.L. Mencken Club, a white nationalist group right here in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. We’re on the map.

While bigotry has been around since the beginning of time, or at least the beginning of humankind, and while it is deeply rooted and embedded in every country and culture, we hope that this series of sermons, will at least scratch the surface in three ways...

1. We hope that it will help to create an awareness of the hate that abounds and to create an awareness not only of the problem, but also the role that we play in the problem. The fact that we live where we do, that we enjoy the opportunities that we have, means that we are privileged, like it or not.
2. In this series, we will once again explore the biblical stories that instruct us and inspire us and help us to better understand our call as peacemakers in this world and as followers of Jesus’ way.
3. We will consider our call to action, as individuals and as a faith community. And throughout we hope to tell stories that inform us and form us...like Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese.

The scriptures have much to say about this. This morning I’d like to turn to the book of Acts. This book gives us insight into the early church and how they spread the Jesus movement, striving to faithfully continue the work that Jesus began. These first Christians, too, were faced with many of the same issues with which we deal today.

The story from Acts 10 is a fairly lengthy one so rather than read the entire chapter from the NRSV—the New Revised

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Standard Version, I'm going to give you the PPSV to set the context for this morning's passage.

- Key players are Peter, one of the 12, even on the inner circle of disciples, and a leader in the early church. Cornelius, Capt. of the Roman guard
- was hungry, went out on balcony — fell into trance
- vision of sky opening, blanket lowered, filled with every kind of animal/reptile and bird
- heard voice saying "If God says it's OK, it's OK" — repeated twice
- no interpretation given — Peter might have been horrified, even repulsed...these animals would have violated Jewish food laws. These were the very things that he, and all of the Jews, had been taught to avoid, his whole life, and even generations before him.
- by coincidence, Cornelius was told in a dream to send for Peter
- Peter arrived at Cornelius' home and breaks into a sermon

ACTS 10.34–36

Peter fairly exploded with his good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from — if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open. The Message the Lord sent to the children of Israel — that is the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ. Everything is being put together again — well, God's doing is everywhere, among everyone."

Peter spoke clearly and with conviction — the Jewish food laws, which for centuries had been followed faithfully, no longer mattered. And furthermore, God's intention was to likewise include all people — the Gospel, the Good News of

God's love, is for everyone. No longer were there to be "outsiders."

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We can only begin to imagine how radical this notion of inclusion was and what courage it took on Peter's part to bring this message of openness. For generations, not only had the Jews followed carefully the Jewish food laws, they had remained a separate people, as God enabled them to find their identity as God's own chosen. And now...this reversal: God includes all people, not just the Jews. God plays no favorites!

Peter's courageous message changed the world, as the Gospel was taken to Gentiles. The events that we read in the book of Acts were crucial turning points in the spreading of the Jesus' story and God's love for the world. The old categories and barriers between people no longer existed. Even the rules about 'unclean' and 'clean' had fallen away.

And if that weren't radical enough, the news of God's impartial love is not some abstract idea about God. It placed clear demands on Peter, on the Jews, on Cornelius, on everyone who heard, and it places demands on us as well. God wants to be in relationship with all kinds of people. Because God loves all people, we are able, indeed called—to love as God loves. Because God is the God of impartiality, we are called to be a people of impartiality. Just as God accepts all people, we, as members of the family of God, are called to accept each other. Regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation and regardless of any -ism that threatens to divide us.

Peter had a dream. Martin Luther King, Jr., had a dream, too. He shared Peter's vision of God's family where everyone is an insider. Christians around the world are challenged by these dreams. The civil rights movement in the 60's and the ending of apartheid in South Africa are

6 both good examples that bigotry does not simply go away...it takes the actions and words of people of faith, on-going, to change attitudes and actions. And it takes courage...the courage of Martin and PeeWee and Peter. As we continue in the story in Acts, we read that Peter puts his courageous sermon into action—not only does he spread the news, he enacts God’s impartial love by eating with Gentiles. At the table Peter actively works out reconciliation with Gentiles; he actively seeks peace with them. Peter took action. We are called to action.

There are some buzz words around, prompting our response to bigotry. These words are reflected in the title of this series. Actor, ally or accomplice.

It’s not enough to not do or be something. A person who is not something, not a racist, not homophobic, not prejudiced, may not do anything to add to the hate, but may not do anything to counteract it either. If there’s something offensive, maybe a joke at someone’s expense, an actor might quietly sit by. For an actor, being nice is what matters. This is someone who doesn’t disrupt the status quo, whose actions do not shift the overall outcome.

An ally, on the other hand, is more vocal and active—disrupting a conversation that is inappropriate, taking time to educate those present and create an awareness when appropriate.

But I believe that Peter, in his call to action, was more radical than even an ally. Peter did that which had been forbidden...he stayed and ate with Gentiles. He proclaimed, in front of everyone, that God plays no favorites. His dream and his sermon, threw out the old mores and ushered in a new age of equality and inclusion.

I think that Peter was an accomplice. Accomplice implies one who is open to risk-taking and directly stands up to

something bigger. Peter was a co-conspirator, with God, in a whole new inclusive kingdom.

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And I think that Jesus, too, was an accomplice, as he continually questioned and confronted the powers-that-be and challenged oppressive systems. Being an accomplice, it's risky, it takes great courage. But this is the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ.

This congregation has a history of finding that courage... we know what it means to be an accomplice. In 1993, when our country was poised on the brink of war against Iraq, we published a letter, a full-page ad, in the Lancaster Newspaper...calling for peace.... With patriotism running hot and high, it certainly was not a popular message at the time. Yet we had the courage and acted on that courage, speaking to the powers that be and standing up for something we believed in—peace on earth, Shalom for all of God's creation.

That same year, this congregation made a deliberate, careful decision to be a congregation open to all. There was careful study of scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit was sought as we came to the decision that we agree... God plays no favorites. And that is why we've met during Sunday school these past few weeks and why we have a church council meeting after church today—to talk about our response to the proposed district policy coming before conference in October.

Lilla Watson, an educator and activist is credited with a quote that has served as a motto for many activist groups around the world. "If you have come here to help me, you're wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." That's what it means to be an accomplice!

8 Peter was called and answered the call with great courage. We, too, have been called, and have answered that call with great courage. And there will be more opportunities...we never know what act of courage we might be called to next. Of this we are certain. God plays no favorites.

I look forward to these next few weeks, exploring together our call to courage, as we continue on our journey of peace, service and openness to all!

