

God's Special Favorites

Scripture Reading: Acts 10:34-43

A mother rises early.
Oh don't they always?
She rises early, up before the sun is,
and she takes flour
and yeast
and water
and salt and a little sugar
and creates, from these sparse ingredients, bread.
That great act of love.

She kneads, and shapes it onto a pan, and bakes it, and eventually sets it out to cool in the chill morning air, before her busy morning begins in earnest. Get the kids up. Start the laundry. Check the emails to make sure work hasn't imploded overnight. Get breakfast in every body. Feed the dogs. Does she need to put gas in the car? Did the check to the plumber ever get sent? Remember. Remember. Remember. It is life as usual.

Later that day, she leaves for an afternoon of errands, a little nervous, mostly trusting her two sons to look after themselves for a couple of hours. They are old enough to be safe, though not necessarily wise.

Just as she grabs her keys and wallet, and heads out into the world, she pauses, and reminds her younger son – there is bread - fresh bread! - on the counter. He knows it's there – she didn't have to remind him, he mutters with an eye roll. He knows because his mother always makes sure there is bread for them. He knows because it looks so delicious and it smells so good and he knows this kind of bread is particularly filling and warm and wonderful. It is his favorite. Childish annoyance aside, he smiles inwardly, grateful to know that the bread is there, and then promptly forgets about it.

The day stretches on. The boys play, and keep themselves occupied with games and occasional arguments, oblivious to the time, until their bellies begin to rumble with hunger.

Then the younger son remembers the knowledge with which he was entrusted– there is fresh bread on the counter! He is comforted by the promise of a full belly soon. And in a flash, he decides to tell his brother – Guess what! Good news!

Alright, I'm going to be honest with you, I wrote today's sermon about eight different ways a dozen different times before it got to you this morning and I'm still not totally sure where it's heading. Mother's Day is a minefield. It's not a liturgical holiday, but it is also enough of a THING that you can't just not mention it in church. There are as many experiences of motherhood – mothering and being mothered – as there are people, and inevitably someone is going to be left out or hurt by what I've said or left unsaid. We never, ever want to hurt you, and yet we want this to be a place where you can bring your hurt, where your lament is given space and your sorrow can gain shape.

We never, ever want to make church about a hallmark holiday, and yet we want to make sure we have room to celebrate the joyous relationships around us. There is no winning. There is no one sermon to rule them all.

So, I come before you today admitting defeat on this one. There is no sermon here, not really. I mean, Motherhood is a moment where someone, hopefully by their own choice, said this is my body, broken for you. What more is there to say than that?

There is only returning to scripture like the gentiles and like Peter and like anyone else, unsure of what we will find there. Thinking we know what one thing it means, and finding out it means something completely, extraordinarily different. Thinking we are here to tell someone else what the truth is, only to find we are being called to learn instead, calling up from our shared memory what Sofia - mother Wisdom - has to teach us again.

In today's story from Acts, we get to remember what we look like through the eyes of a loving parent, God who is mother and father and parent beyond binary to all of us. That God's love is transcendent of all human relationships, but is hinted at when our relationships are based in deepest love.

God's love is not something we can look at dead on. There is no one-to-one comparison to our human experience. Scripture – all scripture, but especially Peter's encounter this morning – is a reflection of how we look in God's eyes, as God's children, frustrating and delighting God as any child does their parents. We are converted and convinced and changed forever by our proximity, by how close we can get to the things in life that show us what God is like. Is God like a father? Sure. Sort of. Sometimes. Is God like a mother? Of course. Again, sort of. Depending on the day. Depending on the parent. Is God like a doting grandparent or a loyal sibling or a chosen family surrounding you with unflinching love? Absolutely. Sort of. God *is* none of those things because God is nothing but God. But God is like a lot of things. And this morning, we'll say God is like a loving parent, watching two children, Cornelius and Peter, try and mess up and try again to understand what their parent means.

The scripture this morning is a story of conversion and extension. It starts back at the beginning of chapter 10 with Cornelius, a God-fearing and generous man, a centurion, a gentile. Cornelius has a wild vision – an angel visits him, letting him know that because Cornelius is righteous and generous with the poor, God has taken special notice of him. Cornelius is shocked, and a bit terrified in the way that people are always terrified when angels show up in the Bible. God has noticed him. And God wants Cornelius to gather his best men and send them off to find Peter, so he does. But this is not the story of Cornelius's conversion.

The story then snaps over to Peter, who is getting ready for an afternoon of chilling on a rooftop—eating, praying, reflecting. While he's waiting for his lunch to be prepared, he falls into a trance and sees some wild, uncommon thing – a vision of a sheet being lowered to the ground like a picnic blanket, filled with wild animals “all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air”, and a voice telling him “Peter – get up. Kill and eat.” Peter resists – these animals were unclean and he would never eat something unclean. It ran counter to God as Peter understood God to be. But that voice – it reminds him who is in charge. That the trappings of human religion are never over and above God. If God says it's clean, it's clean. So go on, Peter. Eat your reptiles.

This could then, be the story of Peter's conversion. The opening verses of the scripture we heard today are a revelation – he was blind but now he sees, he thought God was one thing – picky, exclusive, showing preferences – and now he understands that God is something else – inclusive, broadly reaching for everyone. Peter is transformed by this experience.

But more than anything, I wonder if this is the story of the conversion of the followers of Jesus Christ – what would be the church – as we learn to love more by accepting that we are more wildly loved than we can imagine. Peter’s experience is a roadmap by which the church is converted, over and over again.

The church is of God, but the church is not God. Only God is God. The church is just one way of us trying to know who God is, standing on our tiptoes and looking through the cloudy glass of our own human experiences, peering into the ancient words of our heritage and listening for the prophetic promises still carried on the breeze. The church is a human institution. It is fallible, just as we all are. It changes, and reforms, and breaks apart. The church gets it wrong – frequently – when we drive people away, when we act as gate keepers, when we communicate tepid welcome and muffled disapproval. We hold onto secret faith that God has special favorites and are convinced we are among them.

And when the church is at her best, we are helping people – all people – know how they are seen when looked at by the eyes of a loving God. We let people know just how deep God’s love goes, and journey deeper into it together, holding no one back, knowing that we are all richer for the journey shared.

The truth we know from this morning’s scripture, the wild truth Peter is let in on, the table to which Cornelius is invited, is that God’s love is always deeper, and more expansive, than ours.

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” No, the living waters, the bread of life, are here, for all God’s children. All of us. Thanks be to God.

Sermon preached by Reverend Dr. Laurie Lyter Bright at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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