

Part 20: Borders and Belonging

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"Give me your tired, your poor // Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, // The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. // Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, // I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

The words of that poem by Emma Lazarus are inscribed on base of the Statue of Liberty in the New York harbor. They declare with words what the Statue of Liberty declares in form: come from the nations to the land of liberty, freedom, opportunity and peace.

Given our rootedness in immigration—you might find it odd that every election cycle argues anew about borders, boundaries and by what means outsiders can become citizens. Citizenship is a prized possession. With it, our Constitution awards all the "privileges and immunities" that go with it.

It's a debate that most countries wrestle with for good reason. To be too closed off to the outsider means that you nearly suffocate yourself in isolation. To be too open and undefined towards outsiders means that you lose any sense of nationhood or government altogether.

Our Founders, either in their wisdom or their folly, set up this debate knowingly. The Constitution refuses to define how one becomes a citizen. Instead it gives congress the responsibility to establish the rules of belonging.

In America, "We the people," get to decide "who the people" are and by what way we recognize that.

Central to the preaching ministry of Jesus was the message that, "the Kingdom of God has come." The privileges and immunities of that kingdom are amazing. We get the privilege of restoration to God and to each other. We get eternal life. We are afforded immunity from eternal damnation and hell fire. The lamp of Christ out shines the promise of Lady Liberty.

But how does one become a citizen of that kingdom? Where the Founders deferred those terms knowing their own limitations—our God is not limited. He is sovereign over all, infinitely wise and good and he has not left the path the citizenship undefined. God tells us how we might become members of his kingdom.

Our passage in the book of Acts today highlights this in one of the greatest watershed moments in all scripture—the inclusion of Gentiles into the promise, plan and people of God. It is the naturalization ceremony of eternal proportions. And today we will see how you, and many, and anyone who comes to the harbor of God might find ourselves as citizens in his kingdom.

Our main point today is this: **Jesus alone is the hope of God for any who believe.** And we will see this in three ways: **The Church's Borders, The Church's Boundary,** and the **Church's Belonging.**

Our passage is very long this morning, but in short what we see today are two men, each with two visions, and each with individual responses that God brings together himself for our own clarity.

As we begin to examine the two men involved we encounter our first point: **The Church's Borders**

The first man is a man named Cornelius—he's not a Jew. He's a Gentile. A Gentile is anyone that is not a Jew. When God approached Abraham, he chose to establish a covenant with his offspring—a people group who would go on to be called Israel. Anyone not belonging to the 12 Tribes of Israel was by nature an outsider to all the privileges of God's rule.

But God made a way for Gentiles to be added in the Old Testament. First, they must renounce their previous national heritage. Second, they had to adopt as a standard of living the Jewish standards of living according to the law. That meant their dietary laws and, for men, the law of circumcision.

Cornelius is introduced to us as (**Acts 10:1-3**) a devout and faithful man, who feared God, was generous to the poor and who prayed to the God of the Hebrews continually. Yet, he wasn't a convert to Judaism. He was a Roman citizen and actively so. He was a military leader, a centurion, of the Italian Cohort. He was a war hero of the very forces occupying the land of the Jews. And yet, God sent an angel to give him a vision. That's the context of Cornelius.

The other vision came to a man who is the exact opposite of Cornelius. That man is the Apostle Peter. A Jew by birth, chief of Jesus' 12 closest disciples, the Rock of the Church, the apostle to the Jews, and leader of the church in Jerusalem. These two men both want to belong to God, but one has what seems to be a natural belonging, and the other knows himself to be an immigrant of sorts.

What are their two visions?

To summarize: In Cornelius', vision the commander was himself commanded by a greater authority to visit a man below him in worldly authority. In Peter's vision, the purist was told to eat what below him in moral purity. Politically and religiously both men are put in oddly compromising situations.

What is going on here? Well, God is stretching and illuminating the borders of belonging. There were strict lines between Jews and Gentiles, and between the dietary laws of the Old Testament and the diets of the surrounding people groups.

Our own culture understands how what we eat signifies, to a degree, the class of person we are. It marks us off. Vegetarians look down on meat eaters. Keto people shame carb people. Organic eaters throw darts at processed sugar slurpers. And Lactose Free people steal the joy out of everything.

But for the Jews, this wasn't an accidental classification, it was intentional. God's law did dictate a list of foods they can and can not eat. And everything on that divine picnic blanket were Jewish no-nos.

And yet God says to Peter, **Acts 10:13**, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!"

Peter is beside himself. To give up the dietary laws was to give up the core of his identity as a Jew. This is the equivalent of telling a Montana fan to put on a Montana State shirt. It's an NFL game opening with the Canadian national anthem. It's not only a rejection of his own identity—but it is an acceptance of a different one altogether. This is a boundary line Peter can't cross. He says, **Acts 10:14**, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

But God said to him a second time, **Acts 10:15**, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” Luke tells us this happened three more times before it was taken back up to heaven.

Two men, two visions, and notice the irony of their two responses.

The hardened soldier was filled with terror, and the church's spokesperson was speechless. Verses 4 and 17 tells us Cornelius was terrified and Peter was perplexed.

Cornelius feared God, but he also knew that there was some sort of barrier between him and full belonging. So when he stood face to face with an angel of God—he had no confidence either in his military might or his moral life. For those who are uncertain of where they stand before God—there's nothing more terrifying than knowing you're being summoned. But one day—each of us will stand before God and if Rambo quivered at an angel—what will your confidence be before the Almighty himself.

But notice how Peter's self-assuredness is not spared either. In fact, his turmoil might have been worse. Nothing gives us fear like knowing we don't belong. And nothing gives us frustration like realizing we don't know how we belong. The very ground Peter stood on was shifting. Even for Peter, to be in Christ was to keep the Old Testament law.

I know one missionary who spoke of a Christian woman from Egypt who asked him if it were permissible to not celebrate Christmas on December 25th. Her church in her homeland followed the Orthodox Calendar and celebrated Christmas later, she had been told by other western Christians that she was living in sin because she didn't celebrate it on the day the rest of us celebrated it. Is that the border? I know some who have come up to our church from the Bible belt and they have been shocked that I'm not wearing a suit and tie and you're not in dress clothes. Is that the border?

These are two extreme examples—but I wonder what you might define the borders of belonging to be? Maybe it's Jesus plus some sort of strict rule: no secular music, no TV, no to this or that government policy? Or maybe it's the opposite. It's Jesus plus total freedom. How can you claim to be a Christian if you care about holiness—didn't Jesus pay it all? If we are to be a Christian we can't judge at all? If we aren't sure of the borders, we will always wrestle with legalism or liberalism.

But the story goes on. Notice what happened when Peter arrived in Caesarea: **Acts 10:24-26**, "And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up saying, 'Stand up; I too am a man.'"

And here, Peter's vision began to make sense. As Cornelius humbled himself before the lead apostle of the Jew, Peter calls him to stand because, "I too am a man." The vision's confusion was leading to a certain conviction. He says, **Acts 10:28**, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate or visit with anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean."

And there it is! The vision wasn't about the food itself! Yes! The dietary laws of the Old Testament—in fact the whole of the Mosaic Law was fulfilled in Jesus. God made unclean food clean. And Peter here made the connection. If God can make unclean food clean, then he can make unclean people clean.

God wasn't removing distinctions between sinners and saints—the gospel of Jesus is just a shift of who makes who distinct. We don't make ourselves distinct by any external measure—God makes us distinct through faith in Jesus. God turns sinners into saints, from every tongue and nation. As hungry as Peter was—here we see how hungry God is for salvation.

God arranged for Peter to be brought to Cornelius so that Peter might see God is bringing all nations to himself. That's why Peter says, **Acts 10:34**, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality."

In matters of God's cleansing work, that is God's *saving work*, God sees no borders. He makes no distinction. He shows no partiality.

Who does God show no partiality? Because it's who God is! In our English translations it seems like there is a God who does the work of showing no partiality. But this is actually a noun. God is, literally, not a respecter of persons. This is not what God does—this is who God is!

That doesn't mean he doesn't care for people. But it means in matters of who God will cleanse, he pays no respect to who you are prior to his cleansing work. His salvation then isn't based on what you do and how God will then respond. His salvation is based on who he is not who you are. You could be born to the most pagan tribe--God pays no respect. You could be one of my children--God pays no respect.

The church has no physical borders because God is the border. You can't, by any physical law or culture become a citizen of God's Kingdom. That means that anyone--regardless of who they are, where they are, where they live, what they make, or what they eat can be made clean and saved by God.

It's no longer by adhering to Jewish customs that we are cleansed. It's not mere desire to worship God that makes us citizens. The physical borders have been removed. But there's still a boundary! We must be made clean! Any can come—but they still come on a definite term of belonging.

This is our second point: **The Church's Boundaries.**

Let's read on, **Acts 10:34-35**, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

This is really important in our world today. We love the idea of diversity, and yet diversity demands boundaries.

We live in a culture that simultaneously says, "Accept everyone!" while also saying, "Accept everyone unless they have a different belief on accepting." There's an innate boundary when we say, "We just need to love one another," while also saying, "That's not loving."

If we are going to be a society which makes sense we have to agree on what words mean. And therefore if we are to "love" someone we must also have a clear idea of what "not loving someone means." Now, who gets to decide that boundary is the real question?

For the Christian, we readily accept that there is a boundary--and that God gets to make it, and that God himself is the boundary.

That's what Peter just said. Yes, the law of acting a certain way to earn God's covenant blessing was a burden hard to bear. The law was meant to exhaust us. But when Jesus fulfilled the law--it didn't mean that we are instantly qualified to be loved by God. It doesn't mean that God doesn't have standards. It just means that there is no human standard which God considers as sufficient.

What is the new standard of belonging to God, **Acts 10:35**, "In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

There it is. Any can come regardless of your physical borders--and yet to accepted by God you still must do two things: fear him, and do right.

Cornelius feared God didn't he? That's what we learned. But was Cornelius righteous? That's the Greek word used for "right" in verse 35. This is the only time in the book of Acts it's not translated as righteousness. You can't belong to God because you belong to a certain group of people, or because you met a certain code. You belong to God by fearing him and by doing what is righteous.

Fear God, be righteous. That's the standard of acceptance. But that's also the problem isn't it. The Bible tells us, no one is righteous. In fact at one point in all of our lives we neither feared God, nor were we doing right by God. God is no respecter of persons, and we in our sin are no respecter of God! Unless our righteousness and our affections change—we are doomed. The spiritual boundary is higher than the physical border!

But that's why Peter now launches into the gospel summary which solves our problem. We are on the outside of the boundary--but Jesus bring us in. **Acts 10:36-43**, "As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Peter does two really important things in this text. He shows us that Jesus is the center of all scripture. God's good news was foreshadowed in the Old Testament—but where did God's gospel finally get preached? Not in belonging to ethnic Israel, but in **verse 36**, "The good news of peace through Jesus Christ."

But Jesus is also the center of all judgement. He is Lord and judge of all. And because he is Lord of all (not just Jews) and because he is judge of all (not just of those who put him to death)--then Jesus alone is the hope for all who stand condemned!

Later on in Acts Paul will say, **Acts 17:30-31**, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Jesus came and he feared God and was righteous where we failed. But because he died and rose again—he calls us to repent and turn to him for life. 1 John tells us that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleans us from all unrighteousness.

What's the boundary of the church? Being cleansed by Jesus. Repenting and turning to him. We are made citizens by his birth—by our new birth in him. There is salvation in no one else—and because of that we preach Christ to everyone else.

What Lady Liberty says to the poor, the huddled and the masses, Jesus says to us: **Matthew 11:28-30**, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Would you come to him? You cannot go to another. Clean, unclean, here is the one who makes us fully clean—here is true acceptance. And that acceptance is bigger than you can ever imagine.

This is our last point: **The Church's Belonging**

Notice how those who come to the boundary of God by faith in Jesus are accepted fully by God through his Spirit, and by the body of the church through baptism.

And just as Peter was really ramping up—God took the mic: **Acts 10:44–48**: While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days."

When you are made a citizen of the United States, you take an oath of citizenship and then a Federal Judge declares you to be a citizen. And here we see that once these Gentiles hear of the full message of salvation in Jesus Christ and believe it—they are declared citizens by the Judge of all mankind. The invisible reality for the Christian is that we are filled with the Holy Spirit. For these Gentiles it happened just as it did in Jerusalem to show God's equal work to Jew and Gentiles.

When you take up faith in Jesus Christ, you cannot get more saved. By the will of the Father, through the work of the Son, you are filled with the Spirit of God himself. You belong and not by any secondary way. You belong to God truly and fully. You have been united with him by faith—and he grants you the Spirit as the seal.

But that act of declaration is accompanied by a real belonging with God's people. That's what baptism is—baptism is the external marker and visible badge of citizenship that God gives to his church.

When a Judge confers citizenship upon you—you are a citizen even if you never make it out of that room. But because you will hopefully leave that room, you are also given key documents and a certificate of naturalization. This is what allow you to join the culture you live in and make it known that you are afforded the same rights and privileges of others.

That's what baptism is for the church. It marks off God's people in public as a new society—one nation under God.

And notice how Peter champions for their acceptance by baptism into the church because of their acceptance by God through the Holy Spirit. He says, "Can anyone withhold water for baptism from these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

Belonging to God is the act of faith in Jesus which seals us with the Holy Spirit. Belonging to the church is where we together recognize that chief and exclusive work of salvation through the sign of baptism and we welcome them into the new society of faith.

That's what we are looking for in the church. We don't want people who live in houses like us. We don't want people who have the same hobbies as us. We don't want people who have the same aged kids as us. We want, and we labor, for people who have the same savior as us. That's the boundary of the church.

If you want to know more about that, I'd encourage you to attend our next Church Essentials class on February 23rd.

Because it's here in the church where we labor for true diversity and belonging. It's here where we attempt to live under and preach to others the wonderful work of Jesus to all who believe.