

Acts 11:1-18

Discomfort and Challenge Grows into Courage and Knowledge

The morning I sat down to write this message I managed to spill an entire cup of hot chocolate over my desk. It flowed under my day timer and computer. It hit a magazine resource I had not even cracked open yet. I was covered and had to change and the floor was awash with the brown combination of milk and cocoa mix. Sticky, messy, and wet. I really wanted to cry. I had awoken early to get to work on my writing, had already had several distractions, and now the next half hour would be spent cleaning up the mess. Just when I thought I had it all taken care of I found that a number of items needed a second wash down and the magazine needed to have every page pulled one from another as it was drying with pages sticking together.

I was distressed, anxious, and frustrated, but managed to stay calm. Which in itself tells me I continue to mature as that would not have been my response even a few years ago. Even so Ken heard the despair in my voice and called out to see if he could help. I responded with a yes, I said even if the help only made a difference through moral support. I knew I was perfectly capable of cleaning it all up, but just knowing that I didn't have to deal with this minor incident on my own made a difference in my day. Having Ken come alongside me was a gift.

This led me to thinking about the challenges that others face and how that might figure into my sermon writing. I was also keenly aware that September 30th had marked the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation coupled with the story from the local evening news in which a "solution" had been found to deal with the homeless encampment in Thunder Bay at an abandoned gas station in a mall parking lot. The solution being a fence so that the homeless, who are primarily Indigenous, would not be able to take shelter under the canopy of the abandoned property, forcing them back into the nearby bushes.

Then as I scrolled through my Facebook feed, I saw posts that said something to the effect that as we roll up our orange t-shirts and put them in the drawer for next year remember that Indigenous people cannot roll up their trauma and put it away, they live with it everyday. I had my momentary challenge with a cup of hot chocolate that was taken care of in a relatively short period of time and I had help to deal with it, but what can be seen just outside the door of our church here in downtown Thunder Bay, across from City Hall no less, is generational trauma and it will take years to address. It leaves one to wonder what our role is to be in this. How do we come alongside in situations where it is more than a moment in time, but years in the making and will takes more than a mere shot in the dark to bring about any lasting hope, change, or significant

restoration of human lives? How do we work through the unknowns and into a future that leads to life not just for ourselves but for all?

Turning to the story of Peter we come upon him trying to explain to his peers why he went into the home of a Gentile person. You see part of the challenge here is that Gentiles were considered unclean and, well, you were not supposed to hang with that crowd especially if you were one of the original disciples. And yet, Peter has had this experience that he believes is from God. An experience that makes him understand that God's love go far beyond what we humans in our limited knowledge can begin to comprehend.

There was also Cornelius, who was not referred to by name in the reading, but is named in the scripture where the actual event is laid out. It was his home to which Peter was brought, where Peter preached, and where other Gentiles became believers in Christ. Peter and Cornelius both had to become open to the presence of the Holy Spirit that was leading them to new ways of being in the world. In their discomfort and challenge, along with that of all of the apostles and believers who were in Judea, things changed, the community of faith was broadened and opened. Through them, God was doing the work of reconciliation between people. God is still doing the work of reconciliation between people.

This week in particular and in the coming year St. Andrew's is embarking on a path that we hope will lead us into a new way of being in the world, a way that will be challenging and uncomfortable at times. What we are called to is to see what God is doing in the world around us, right from our doorstep to the broader context of needs in other places, then determine our response to God. Will the challenge and discomfort make us fearful and want to stay safe or will we be determined to be courageous, open, and become knowledgeable?

This is a question for the church and for individuals. Are we willing to become courageous and knowledgeable about others? Are we willing to provide hospitality and at times accept hospitality that is out of our comfort zone? You see God's story in Acts is about drawing wide the circle of people that God loves and has concern for. We do not limit God. Peter states in verse 17, "If then 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?" One might simplify that to say in all ways, "Who I am I that I could hinder God?"

If God's love is expansive and inclusive, then we are also called to an expansive and inclusive love. If God's plan is for reconciliation of all people to Godself and us to each other, then our call is for reconciliation of all people to God and us to each other.

If we are to be the church in the world, if we are to be people of God in the world, we need to prepare to be uncomfortable and challenged. Being the same, doing the same as we have done in the past, even if that worked in the past, does not address the changes and challenges we are experiencing in our time and in our place in the world.

May our hearts and minds be opened like Peter and Cornelius as well as all those people that moved an entire church into a new way of being in the world, of coming along side those in need. Not to fix them or their problems, but to let them know they are not alone, that they are cared for, have value, and we are in it for the long haul. We may not get it right every time. That is okay. We will learn from our missteps and errors. It is our time and turn now and if not, if not us, then who? We come alongside in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.