



## Sermons from

### “Christian Unity”

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January 29, 2012

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Acts 10:34-46

This past week Jan 18-25, was the International Week of Christianity Unity. It is a week where at least once a year we are called to be reminded of the great diversity of ways of adoring God. During the week of Christian Unity we are invited to be open to the ways in which our hearts can be touched through realizing that our neighbor's ways are not so strange, after all.

It is appropriate then that our New Testament lesson highlights the apostle Peter and his introduction to diversity and unity **and** that we are celebrating the North American tradition of Kirkin' of the Tartans.

The apostle Peter's introduction to diversity and unity starts at the beginning of Chapter 10. It is here that we are introduced to a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius lived in Caesarea a 40-mile journey from Joppa where Peter lived. Cornelius was a God-fearing Gentile who prayed constantly to God and gave to the poor. As a God-fearing Gentile, Cornelius would have been familiar with the Jewish teachings and traditions of Jesus, Peter and the rest of the apostles. Cornelius would not have been allowed in the temple in Jerusalem but was the closest thing to being in the Jewish in-crowd by being a believer of the monotheistic God in the early first century. The story describes Cornelius' experience with a vision. After the vision he sends two of his servants and a devout soldier to Peter in Joppa (modern day Tel Aviv) for that is what the Lord told him to do in this vision.

Meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter has a vision where is he instructed three times to “Get up, kill and eat.” Peter protests this vision and claims that he would never eat anything profane or unclean. But the voice of the vision says to Peter, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” While Peter is still processing this vision, Cornelius' servants and soldier arrive and convince Peter to go with them to Caesarea. It is here that our New Testament reading comes. So I invited you to listen to the word of God:

Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by

hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

This is the Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

The story continues into Chapter 11 where Peter reports to the gathering of disciples in Jerusalem of his goings-on. The circumcised believers criticized Peter for eating with Gentiles and Peter again recounts his vision and his actions in Caesarea to be that of the Lord. And at the end of chapter 11, Peter says, “Who was I that I could hinder God.”

But in verse 36 of our reading today is where Peter’s understanding of the reconciling work of Jesus really takes place. In verse 36, Peter proclaims, “You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all” is the fundamental beginning of the unity found in Christ despite ethnicity, cultural affiliation, circumcision status, or tartan.

Yes, I said tartan. The Kirkin’ of the Tartan, which we will celebrate today at 3:00 p.m. in the Nave celebrates Scottish clansmen (and women) demonstration of true brother and sister hood.

Believed to be a specifically North-American tradition a Kirkin’ of the Tartan is not celebrated by those in Scotland, but is hypothesized to be linked back to Scotland in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the English parliament and monarchy banned weapons, as well as, the wearing of tartan or kilts by Highland clansman. Legend goes that after tartans and kilts were outlawed, clansmen would carry small pieces of the banned cloth to the church or *Kirk* and clergy would slip a blessing into the service.

The modern day service of the Kirkin’ is believed to have been established by Rev. Peter Marshall, a native of Scotland who served at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. In April 1941 he organized the service as a way to raise funds for the British war effort. The Kirkin’ of the Tartan service has morphed over time and has become a way to remember ancient times, as well as, past and present kith and kin, while asking for God’s help and blessings in the future.

So what does this have to do with the apostle Peter and the newly minted Holy-Spirit baptized believers in the Acts lesson? In my research about tartans and about the Kirkin’ service, I came to understand the uniquely oneness and unity found in the tartan and consequently the North American worship service.

The tartan is a symbol of love and togetherness that is celebrated by clans and tribesman in Scotland. The Scots are a fiercely proud people and they are also a uniquely united people.

Their tartans are a demonstration of the unique individuality and unity. Tartans were developed simply because each geographic area liked to weave a certain design using local herb dyes. So clans or geographic gatherings of people for protection, economics, political and social support would be uniquely united by one pattern of cloth while another clan would have their own unique pattern or tartan. So the variety of tartans brought the richness of individuality and wholeness of unity to the nation of Scotland.

I cannot help but think of Peter and Cornelius as also bringing their own unique richness of individuality to the body of Christ. Like the variety of tartans, Cornelius and Peter would have differed widely in their political, economic and social status, but in Christ they were found to be woven together as the body of Christ.

It should not come as a surprise that unity is an important aspect of the church. We have weeks dedicated to Christian Unity. Our polity or governing structure speaks to unity by saying:

The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction.

But just because our polity states that unity is important, unity is not often easy. As we saw in the Acts story, Peter was questioned by the gathering of Christ-believers in Jerusalem. It took time for Peter's friend to recognize the reconciling work of unity in Christ. It was not easy for Peter and as we see throughout the world and even in our own denomination, unity is not easy. But "perhaps in these troubled times, our willingness to see others as a part of God's good creation can be our gift to the world."

What would it look like to bring our distinct individuality to the unity of the church? What would it look like to be see God's goodness in all of creation? What would it look like to live into the invitation that is issued to us at the table?

God in Christ acts in the world and seeks unity, but often, when God acts we are surprised. As we heard in our Old Testament lesson, God surprises us by making an old man like Abram a father, whose descendants are as numerous as the stars.

Less than a month ago, we traveled to the manger to see God becoming weak in power to become strong in love by entering into our lives in the form of a babe in a manger.

And soon, we will travel the Lenten journey and see again, God's surprising action in the passion event. By becoming weak in power to become strong in love God in Christ hangs on a tree, yet surprises us with love that will never let us go by guiding us to the threshold of an empty tomb. So, why should we not be surprised to see God in our neighbor, our enemy and across the table. It is the same God that surprises us and calls us to unity. A God that surprises us throws open the doors for all is after all, as the apostle Peter can attest, Lord of all.

So let us be open to the surprises of God acting in our lives. Let us be open to the distinctive individuality we all bring and reconciling unity we find in Christ. Let us be open to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let it be so.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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