

Don't Gimme That Old Time Religion: Part Two

A sermon preached by Pastor Beth Lyon at Glenside UCC on October 12, 2014, the second in a series on *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?*

Last week I began a sermon series based on the book *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* The first half of the book is about "Don't Gimme That Old Time Religion." It runs through ten things that Christians *don't* need to believe. One of those is that God causes car wrecks, cancer and other catastrophes. Last week I talked about some of the questions you raised about a good God and the bad things that happen in the world and why we don't believe those bad things are God's doing. This week I'd like to take up another question that was in the offering plate when we held Question Sunday right after Easter. And I admit this one brought me up short: "Will I go to hell for who I love?"

The short answer is "No" I don't believe that gay, lesbian or transgender people are condemned by God for who they are or for who they love and neither does the United Church of Christ. That's why we are an Opening and Affirming Congregation. That's why we support marriage equality.

But since other Christians often disagree with us and pull out bible verses to prove their point, how do we understand this as a faithful stance for Christians to take? Let's start with Jesus. Jesus was continually offending religious people for associating with those they considered sinful and for ignoring religious rules. The gospel tells how Jesus was walking along one day and came across a man named Matthew sitting at a tax booth, and Jesus said, "Follow me." And Mathew did. Everybody just despised tax collectors. Not Jesus. More tax collectors and other people who had been labeled "sinners" showed up at dinner that night with Jesus and the disciples. The religious people were offended that Jesus was befriending these people by sharing a meal with them, but Jesus says that these are the folks who need him. John's disciples want to know why Jesus and his friends aren't fasting like they are and like other good religious people are. Jesus and his friends are criticized for not being strict enough about the Sabbath and even doing work by healing on that day. They are criticized for not following the hand washing rituals before meals. They just break rules all the time! Jesus wasn't overly concerned with rules, with purity.

He was concerned with bringing the outsiders into the circle of God's love and grace. He says, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the skins burst, and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed, but new wine is put in fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved." New wine is active. It ferments. It expands. You can't put it into an old container. There isn't enough room for its activity. Jesus' work is like that. It's the new wine. The old ways didn't allow enough room for what he was doing. He was actively expanding the kingdom of God.

As we read and study the beginnings of the church as the story is told in the book of Acts, that expansion of the circle of God's love and grace continues. Did you know that the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity was an Ethiopian eunuch, a black man who was perceived as someone who was between genders? And then, there's that wonderful story about Peter and Cornelius. Cornelius is an outsider. He is not one of God's people, but a Gentile. Gentiles, by definition, don't know God's rules. We do all kinds of things considered impure and unholy according to Leviticus. And Cornelius is not just a Gentile but a Roman. He is not just a Roman, but a centurion in the Roman army. That makes him an officer in the army of occupation in the Holy Land. So, Cornelius ought to be way outside the circle of God's grace. But that isn't all there is to Cornelius. You see, Cornelius fears God, he respects God. He gives to the poor. He makes a habit of prayer. He doesn't follow the rules that would make him pure and holy, and yet, in spite of that, the Jews around him think that he's a good man.

One day this good man has a vision. One afternoon at three o'clock an angel appears to him and says, "Cornelius!" And Cornelius reacts as most people do when confronted by angels calling their names. He is scared out of his wits. He does manage to ask, "What is it, Lord?" God tells him that his prayers and gifts to the poor haven't gone unnoticed. He is to send a message to Joppa to a man named Simon whom people call Rock or Peter. He'll find him staying with another man named Simon, a tanner whose house is by the sea. Cornelius was a soldier, you'll remember. He knew how to take orders. He also knew how to give them. So, he sent for a soldier under his command, a man who also respected God, and he summoned a few of his slaves and he sent them to Joppa to find this Simon Peter the angel had told him about.

While Cornelius' messengers were on their way to him in Joppa, Peter has a vision of his own. It's about noon and Peter has gone up onto the roof, a sort of patio garden, to pray. It must have been before lunch, because he's hungry. In his vision he sees the heavens open and large sheet coming down out of the sky, lowered by its corners. It contains all kinds of creatures, reptiles and birds. A voice says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." "No way, Lord," Peter replies, "I've never so much as tasted anything unclean, anything that isn't kosher." But the voice replies, "If God says it's clean it's clean." All this happened three times, and then the sheet was pulled back up into the clouds.

Peter is puzzled and with good reason. The Jewish dietary laws aren't trivial. They were meant to show who was a faithful member of God's people and who was not. Blending in, acting just like everyone else has always been a temptation. But they knew that a little incense to the emperor here, a bit of pork there, a little intermarriage and before you knew it there wouldn't be any Jews. So this is not an inconsequential thing that is at stake here. This is a survival issue. Peter is very puzzled by his vision telling him to break the rules about eating.

While he is still mulling all this over, the messengers from Cornelius arrive. They ask for a Simon, sometimes called Peter, who might be staying there. Peter, still puzzling, hears God gently telling him to get up and go with the men knocking at the door because God has sent them to Peter. So Peter goes downstairs and says, "I think I'm the man you're looking for, what's up?" So the soldier and the slaves tell Peter about Cornelius. They tell him what a good man he is and how an angel had sent them to fetch Peter. So Peter goes.

When Peter and some of his friends arrive, Cornelius is waiting with his relatives and friends. As soon as he sees Peter he rushes up and falls at his feet, as if Peter were some kind of angel, confirming all of Peter's suspicions about what strange and ignorant people gentiles are. Once he had pulled Cornelius back to his feet and everyone had been introduced, Peter said to them, "You know, I'm sure that this is all very irregular. Jews aren't supposed to go into the homes of Gentiles. But God has just shown me that I shouldn't be thinking of people as unclean or unholy. So when you sent for me, I came. Now I'd like to know what's going on."

So Cornelius explains about his vision and how he was told to send for Peter and that now he is ready to hear whatever Peter has to say to him. So Peter tells him about Jesus, about who Jesus is and what he did and about the forgiveness that he brings to anyone who believes in him. Before Peter is even finished talking, the Spirit falls on Cornelius and his friends and family. It's like Pentecost all over again. They speak in tongues; they praise God. Peter's friends, Jewish Christians all, can't believe this is happening. Peter figures that since God has sent the Spirit on them, there's no reason not to baptize them, just as he baptized the Jewish believers on Pentecost.

Peter has begun to look at the world in a whole new way. He understands that God has no racial or cultural preferences. He understands that not following all the rules in Leviticus doesn't make you unclean or unholy, or put you outside the circle of God's grace. This is news! Of course, when Peter gets back to Jerusalem, he has a lot of explaining to do. He's "out on a limb without a leg to stand on." He has very little in the way of scripture or tradition to appeal to as a basis for baptizing Gentiles, only the conviction that "Jesus is Lord of all" and that means Lord of everybody, even Roman centurions. One of the reasons why I am a Christian is that I believe that in Jesus Christ God has broken down all barriers that separate human beings. Christians believed, almost from the very beginning God shows no partiality among any of the divisions we humans create, but instead intends to reconcile us all to God and each other. And that's good news . . . for all of us.