

SIGNS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 10: 1-48

“Black Lives Matter!” Some have challenged this slogan with the counter-slogan: “All Lives Matter!” And many of us have rightfully rejected this counter-slogan as undermining the intent of the slogan altogether. Black lives matter because they’re the lives under threat. Even as all lives matter absolutely, all lives aren’t treated the same in our society. Those under threat are the ones that need our undivided attention and action.

But this, then, can also apply to other lives under threat. Today is supposed to be Pride Sunday. Before Covid-19 struck, we at Armour Heights Church had great plans for this weekend and this day. We’ve been on a learning journey over the past year with the intent of renewing and enhancing our affirmation that “Queer lives matter” and by Queer, we mean all those who don’t fit the heterosexual and gender defined norms. I’m using the word queer as shorthand for the acronym: LGBTQI2S, which is more cumbersome, even as it is trying to be inclusive of the vast diversity in sexuality and gender identity that exists.

So, what does it mean to be marginalized and oppressed as a black person? What about as a queer person? Let me share some stories of real persons who are both black and queer.

Preston Mitchum

I am a black gay and queer man from the Midwest. I have experienced discrimination based on my race, sexual orientation, and class, more times than imaginable. Because of what it means to be intersectional—that is, multiple marginalized identities existing at once—it is nearly impossible to determine whether I am experiencing discrimination and mistreatment on the basis of me being unapologetically Black or queer; and many times, both. In an ever-expanding and gentrifying Washington, D.C., where I now reside, it’s commonplace to be followed by law enforcement and be watched as I’m entering more expensive stores. While browsing in Georgetown, a majority-white area, I was once told to leave a store because I “was taking too long looking” just to be mocked by other staff. Not only was I in this particular store for less than 10 minutes, I was certainly not the only one. I was profiled, targeted, and belittled because of where I was and who I was perceived to be. No one defended me, no one made me feel human; and these are not isolated incidences. Every day, LGBTQ people of color wake up

understanding that we can be targeted at the intersection of our identities, and it is a perpetual process of healing and understanding.

Sophia Jackson

I was working at a rehabilitation facility in San Francisco, California, which works with women and children. One day while I was on duty, my immediate supervisor said that she needed to have a conversation with me. I believed we were going to talk about me finally getting hired full time, but she started the conversation by telling me “that the Lord had brought me before her during her prayer time.” After entering into a moment of prayer she disclosed to me that she was concerned that the way I dressed and carried myself was displeasing to God, and that I “knew God had created me to be a wife.” At that point she asked me if I was involved in a homosexual relationship with the woman that she had seen me coming to church with. I did not respond; rather, I asked why she was asking me that question because we belonged to the same church at the time. I was curious as to why this was suddenly an issue. She said that I was sending mixed messages because I presented as male. I ended up having to go on leave due to the stress, and while I was on leave my employment was terminated. I have been unemployed from that field of work ever since.

Taissa Morimoto

Born to immigrant parents and raised in a predominately white neighborhood, I spent most of my adolescence trying to fit in. In order to assimilate, I would always try to hide my differences, including aspects of my race and sexual orientation. For most of my life, I didn't feel comfortable to dress how I want, love whom I want, or be whom I want because I felt like I had to choose safety and security over being myself. I would comply when cashiers told me I should smile more, I would keep silent when restaurant owners made racist comments, and I refused to hold my girlfriend's hand in public, all because I was scared for my safety. I was scared something could happen to me.

Let me add one more story, a story of discrimination that turns in on itself... It's a story that takes place a long, long time ago in a place far, far away...

Peter is the leader of his spiritual community. Peter is also Jewish. And even though his people are fiercely proud of their identity, they're also deeply divided over many things. One of the big sources of division is religion. Peter is a follower of Jesus, and the community he's leading is the Jesus community. But he has a lot of opposition from other Jews, and especially other religious Jews. Why? Because the Jesus Peter is following was far too inclusive. Jesus welcomed all Jews into his fellowship, even those who lacked faithfulness to all the religious laws that defined their Jewishness. For most Jews, what you did on the outside as a good Jew spoke to your faithfulness and purity on the inside. How you ate, what you ate and all your daily rituals were ways you witnessed to your faithfulness and purity before God. Jesus didn't trash those rules and rituals. But he did criticize the authorities when the rules and rituals excluded people rather than included them. If people failed, they needed to be met by a lot of grace not criticism and judgement. Unless you love people, they will never find their way back home.

But what about non-Jews or gentiles as they were called. They didn't even know the rules and rituals they were breaking every day by the way they lived. They had no clue about the scriptures and the sacred traditions that defined true purity and faithfulness. How could any good Jew have anything to do with them? Sure Jesus talked about loving everyone as a creation of God. But his ministry was focussed on his nation. Healing the Jewish nation was the prelude to healing the world.

But now, things had moved well beyond that. How? Peter and his community are being challenged to stretch their inclusiveness even further. How do you open the door of God's love in Jesus to those who are not Jews, to those who are so different it's like the difference between black and white, straight and queer. In Peter's world, the biggest obstacle to inclusion is not sexuality or gender identity or skin colour. In fact, most everyone in Peter's world had skin colour a lot darker than any white person. No. the biggest obstacle to inclusion in Peter's world was that between a Jew and a pagan Roman. If you overcame that barrier, you could overcome any barrier to inclusion.

So how is that barrier overcome? How does Peter the faithful Jew who lives like a faithful Jew, connect with a pagan Roman who knows nothing of this faithfulness, and yet one who has been drawn in by a heart-felt passion for God?

Well, what we're given in our scripture reading is a beautiful account of inner transformation through the Spirit of Jesus. The story begins with a pagan gentile, a soldier named Cornelius. God speaks to him. How do we know it's God and not just his wishful thinking? Because it leads him to Peter; because Cornelius has been given a heart-felt passion to find God. Cornelius has been given a spiritual hunger and a thirst that is in search of fulfillment. What kind of hunger and thirst lives in you and me?...

At the same time Cornelius is experiencing a visitation from God in his heart, Peter is being visited by God in a dream. How do we know it's God and not just a dream? Because of where it takes Peter. If it's driven by love, that's a sure sign God is speaking to you. So what happens? Peter is being challenged with his diet. Certain food is considered unclean for a faithful Jew. But isn't such food also a creation of God? So why think of it as unclean? Obviously this is all about much more than food. The way you eat and what you eat may separate you from others and define your distinctive identity. But it can also become a barrier between you and others.

But Peter doesn't understand his dream. He is troubled by it. He's still thinking about food. It's only when Cornelius shows up at the house he's staying at that he gets it. Food is a symbol for people. Treating certain food as unclean is like treating certain people as unclean, certain races or certain kinds of people. What are the ways we treat certain kinds of people as unclean? How long have black people and queer people been treated as unclean? A long time, and it continues...

But here's the thing, Peter is changed. His vision is transformed. Rather than seeing Cornelius as a pagan Roman, as a soldier who oppresses the Jewish people and is therefore to be hated, he is made to see Cornelius as a child of God who has been awakened by a desire to love God and love God's people.

And what about Cornelius? How is he changed? He is visited by the Spirit of God. How do we know it's the Spirit of God? Because even before The Spirit comes upon Cornelius as it did on those first disciples at Pentecost, it first brings him down on his knees. This is an act of humbling and repentance. Cornelius is a senior officer in the Roman army, and he goes down on his knees before the peasant fisherman Peter who is a subjugated Jew. Such humbling and respect is also an act of repentance as a Roman toward a Jew. He must be seeking forgiveness. He must be seeking a pathway to reconciliation. Certainly, this is how Peter interprets Cornelius' action. For when he tells Cornelius the story of Jesus and how it is the Spirit of Jesus that has brought them to this beautiful moment, Peter also says this: All who believe in him, that is, all who open their hearts to this Jesus and his Spirit, "receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

For love to be inclusive, there has to be justice. For love to be inclusive, there also has to be forgiveness. Peter must not only cross the chasm of racial difference to receive Cornelius as a brother. He must also forgive him. And even as Cornelius must come on his knees in repentance for all he and his people are responsible for, experiencing the love of God in Jesus through Peter, is experiencing the forgiveness of God through his new found brother.

And this, my friends is what God's love does in the story the scriptures tell. The Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is alive and moving when it breaks down walls of division and brings

people together through justice and forgiveness. And where there are the wounds of oppression, love requires an ever deeper movement of repentance and forgiveness for true reconciliation to become possible.

Black lives matter because they're the lives under threat. Until we as a society repent with concrete actions of reparation and reform, the forgiveness offered us by God is meaningless. Queer lives matter because they are lives under threat. Until we as people continue to repent with concrete actions of reparation and ongoing reform, the forgiveness of God and opportunity for expanding our inclusiveness as a community are impossible.

Peter had a dream, Cornelius had a dream. What about you and me? How are we being visited and challenged by the Spirit of Jesus here and now? How is Jesus speaking to us through the testimonies of oppression by Preston, Sophia and Taissa? What dreams are we having? How are we responding? Certainly at Armour Heights Church, we are committing ourselves to being a fully inclusive community who are listening to marginalized voices so that we can cherish and learn from the diversity in sexuality and gender all around us. This is the movement of the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. We recognize it. We seek it's transformation ever more. We stand in solidarity. Come, Holy Spirit, Come!

Let us pray: We need your energy to keep flowing into us, O God... We need to be flooded within by the kind of love that convicts us to really listen and understand, to see what we may often be blind to see, to embrace the diversity around us without being threatened by it, to recognize that justice is about integrity of character and respect for the humanity of others, embracing the diversity in gender, sexuality and colour... Keep fulfilling your work of transformation in us, O God; Amen.