

Avant-Garde God
Acts 11:1-18
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
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Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:1-18, NRSV)

In 1850, one of the most controversial art movements began in France. Those artists who identified with this movement called themselves the avant-garde. In French, avant-garde means, "advanced guard," and it was originally a military term to describe the leading units of an advancing army.

These artists saw themselves in exactly that way, but their battle, their mission, was against society as a whole. They wanted to tear down the status quo and to force people to question their beliefs, their standards, morals. They wanted to push against societal boundaries and those rising to defend them, whether they were other artists, religious leaders, or rulers.

This past week, I commissioned a piece by an avant-garde artist. I'd like to share it with you:



This artist does not see the spaces inside the lines as places to fill with solid color. That's what you would do, but not this artist.

This artist refuses to fill the spaces that some multinational coloring book conglomerate says that he should fill. No, this artist draws new lines within the corporate pre-printed solid black lines and then – and then – he extends those lines wherever he wants. But he's not finished exploding our minds.

This artist even rejects the notion that his canvas must be limited to some page given to him by some self-described adult. He will not only color outside the lines, he will color wherever he pleases.

If you look closely, this particular piece extends off of the page you see here and onto a dining room table and even his own body.

This artist loves pushing your boundaries.

That's where he lives, at the very edge of what you consider acceptable.



This is the artist in studio. Elliot, our avant-garde artist.

The gospels tell the story of when the disciples scolded people for bringing little children to Jesus – children didn't belong with a great teacher. Didn't the parents respect the boundaries?

But Jesus was outraged when he found out about this. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10)

Maybe one of the ways we receive the kingdom of God like a child is by refusing to accept the lines that human beings sinfully draw to designate who belongs and who doesn't. That's because, when it comes to the kingdom, our avant-garde God has a vision that is too big for the lines that we draw and the canvas that we provide. And when the Spirit of God gives people the vision and the courage to go outside those lines, those with a vested interest in those lines will rise up in resistance.

That happened with Peter, of course. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he found some people waiting for him. They were not happy. They had heard that Peter not only went into the house of Cornelius, he ate with his family. They criticized him for it. These people were not only Gentiles, they were the family of an officer of the army that was occupying and oppressing Israel. You are who you eat with, they thought.

The people who confronted Peter were circumcised believers. These were Jews who both followed Jesus and observed the Law of Moses, including the dietary laws about what to eat and who to eat with. Leviticus chapter 11 makes explicit what God's people may eat and not eat, and concludes with this: "You shall therefore be holy, for I *am* holy. This *is* the law of the animals and the birds and every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that creeps on the earth, to distinguish

between the unclean and the clean, and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten."

These laws weren't mere rules for social etiquette, these laws were grounded in Scripture. They were laws that were foundational to Israel's identity as God's people. The purity codes kept them distinct, and if these were relaxed, who would they be? They were understandably troubled by Peter's action, just as Peter was troubled by his vision. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" they asked him.

And Peter simply began to explain it to them, step by step. Peter told them of his vision. Of the sheet that was lowered from heaven three times with animals he had considered unclean. Of how a voice accompanied that sheet, urging him to eat this food. He told them how he resisted, and how he heard the same voice say "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Then, when we woke up from his trance, he said, there waiting for him were messengers that were sent from Caesarea. And he told them of the vision that God had given Cornelius.

And then he ended his talk by saying how he witnessed how God was acting on his vision to include the Gentiles into salvation through Jesus. The Holy Spirit fell upon them, he said, just like it did upon them at Pentecost. Peter explained all these things, and he ended his defense with a simple question: "If God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who am I to blow against the wind? Who am I to think that I could oppose God."

And I love verse 18 in its simplicity. "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Even the Gentiles.

"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it," Jesus said. One of the ways we receive the kingdom of God like a child is by refusing to accept the lines that are sinfully drawn to designate who belongs and who doesn't. Children have much less use for those lines. Maybe that's because they are wonderfully innocent of all those categories that are used to promote power over others.

For it is power that takes words that are useful to describe and uses them as words that divide.

Adult, child.

Male, female.

Single, married.

Gay, straight.

Citizen, non-citizen.

Documented, undocumented.

Member, attender.

Clergy, layperson.

Host, visitor.

White, Black, Brown.

Protestant, Catholic.

Conservative, liberal.

Democrat, Republican.

High school grad, college grad, masters, doctorate.
Healthy, sick
White collar, blue collar

And on and on and on it goes. You know, I think most of us would say, *of course* -- of course, the kingdom of God is open to all people. As a church, we don't see ourselves as putting limits on anything or anybody in that way. After all, we as a congregation just approved a statement that says, "as followers of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:14-20) we are committed to living in community, practicing peacemaking that transcends socioeconomic barriers, acknowledges a diversity of perspectives, and welcomes all."

Yet, what I hear over and over and over in churches – including this congregation -- is that often times the welcome we give extends only so far, and that people who are warmly welcomed into the church find that there is an invisible barrier, an invisible line that prevents them from advancing from honored guest to fully participating member.

We can proclaim the wideness of our welcome from the rooftops yet still find ourselves immersed in the world's antagonisms, defining ourselves by what we are for and against, by our identity, by our anger, by our cultural assumptions.

We define ourselves by a set of belief statements, and we argue for or against them with other Christians. Lost in the midst of this is the Spirit of the avant-garde God pushing us beyond our pages and toward people through whom God is working.

I think the lines we find on our canvas are not the thick black lines in the coloring books but the invisible lines that appear when you paint by numbers. No matter what label or line that divides us from them, you can be sure of this: Whenever who you are becomes more important than whose you are, you have fallen into idolatry of self rather than embracing your identity in Christ.

(St. Marks UMC)

It was a beautiful vision. Yet, what was beautiful about this vision was not merely the wideness of the welcome but what people were welcomed into. We rose together to sing. We poured our hearts out in prayer.

Let us not forget that the church's ultimate goal is not inclusion. In fact, I get a bit uncomfortable when we use that word as a descriptor of an entire church. Don't misunderstand me. Yes, we desire to be inclusive in our welcome. That's a worthy goal. Yet, inclusivity as a value is empty unless it is tied to something else. What are we including others in? Our ultimate goal is not inclusion, our goal is inviting people to join us in taking on a particular identity. For the church, that is the particular life of Jesus Christ, who welcomes all, but also invites all to a particular life, a life that is centered on following him. When Peter reported to the others what had happened at Cornelius house, it was not a report that Gentiles simply needed to be welcomed as Gentiles. No, it was a report that the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, making evident, as verse 18 says, that God had welcomed them into the new covenant, giving them the repentance that leads to life.

The marker, the new marker, of the people was not to be the keeping of the purity code, but in the presence, the gift, of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon all who believe. There is a wideness both in God's mercy and in God's call toward holiness.

Recently, Glen Guyton, the Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA, wrote a blog post that fits so well with our scripture this morning. With a few of my revisions to include our congregation, he writes:

The church, this church, must move beyond its fear that sin, that identity, that our struggles or anything else we imagine is greater than the love of God and the power found in both the life and resurrection of Christ.

The church, this church, must send a clear message that we welcome people to come as they are to the foot of the cross. It is not in our power to transform or fix anyone. God is greater than you, and God is greater than me. MC USA – Berkeley Avenue Mennonite Fellowship -- needs to welcome the dirty, the clean, the rich, the poor, the immoral, the pious, the drug addict and the teetotaler.

“Where is God calling us? Is it only to reach the prim and proper who look and sound like us? Do we have a message, a canvas that transcends, race, culture and identity? Does the gospel we proclaim with our words and our actions allow people to come as they are to experience the transforming power of God?”¹

“The will of God for the world cannot be contained by the limited visions of people trying to define God’s love, constrict God’s mercy, and limit God’s joy. We cannot contain with the lines of our human limitations. We cannot enclose God within our boundaries. We cannot make God conform to our will.”

God is an avant-garde artist that pushes the boundaries of what we as human beings find acceptable. Led by the Spirit of God, Peter was willing to color outside the lines. And Cornelius and his household were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Peter was changed. Cornelius was changed. His household was changed. The church leaders in Jerusalem were changed.

And this is how the world is changed, by people with the courage to not only color outside the lines but to move off the page completely

God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

¹ <https://themennonite.org/smells-like-holy-spirit/>