

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
18 May 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“The Challenge for Us within God’s Blessing for All”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Easter: *BLESS and CHALLENGE*

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Acts 11:1-18

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Calvary, most of you know that I was recently on leave for a couple of months and it was a time of deep discernment. I was really listening for the movement of the Spirit, and it was powerful. Some of what I discerned I haven’t shared with you yet because, to be honest, I was nervous about how you would receive it.

You see, as I was reflecting on the fact that we believe in the truth that God’s love is for everyone, everywhere and that God’s love knows no bounds and has no boundaries, I’ve discerned we no longer need this building. I love this space and this place; it’s beautiful. It’s home to me in so many ways! And those this building has served us well for decades, you know, it’s holding us back. It’s keeping us inside these four walls and we are missing how God is really working outside in the world.

But I know this is huge and as I was thinking about this I realized it would impact some of our beloved traditions.

David, I thought about how we love to sing the Hallelujah Chorus at Easter and that if we don’t have a building then we don’t have an organ or space for a string quartet or brass, so we’d have to switch to listening to the Hallelujah Chorus on Spotify through our airpods at Easter.

Alice, I thought about Christmas Eve, and how beautiful it is to share the light through the pews. But if we’re outside, the wind will just blow our candlelight light out, but you know, there are pretty Christmas lights on houses in this neighborhood, so we can look at those and remember the Light of Christ.

The more I wrestled with this discernment and what it would mean for important worship traditions like baptism and

communion, the more visions I had.

One night—and I know this is really odd—one night, I had a vision and we were all swimming in this huge ocean and everyone was just playing on top of the waves and under the waves—and it was our community but also all the people in the world, all kinds of diverse people. And I heard a voice say, “You don’t need a baptistry to baptize anyone. There is water everywhere. Just jump in the ocean with everyone else and delight in the Spirit of God swirling around all the people swimming.” And I said back to the voice, *“But I love our tradition of salt and light and how would we bless people in that way out in the ocean?”* And the voice replied, *“Salt and Light? The Sun is your Light shining all around you and the water is full of salt...you’re good!”*

The other vision I had was all of us sitting at these huge beautiful long tables and we were having a potluck. And it was awesome. You really showed up and showed out Calvary. Casseroles and Croissants and fruit salads and Pigs n’ a Blanket...we were having so much fun eating together. But then all the sudden

the Communion Table came flying through the middle of all of our tables (it is on wheels, you know), and it came flying down like someone had pushed a grocery cart down a hill and I jumped up to go and try to stop it from rolling, but one of the deacons, I don’t remember which one, said, “Just let it roll. It’s okay. We don’t need to eat those little pieces of bread anymore or just get one ounce of juice in a tiny cup. THIS is our communion—this potluck; it’s all good.

So, I discerned we don’t need to take communion anymore, and I know the idea of potlucks all the time is daunting because of all the cooking that requires, but no worries. I happen to know a guy in the restaurant industry. I know him pretty well actually. And he works at Truth Faith Kitchen. He’ll hook us up with great food.

I know this is a lot, but we’ve always been an agile church Calvary, and we are faithful to God’s leading and this is just the next right step.

...

Before you call an emergency all-church meeting today and

call for a vote to remove the Senior Pastor, no need.

I had no such visions during my leave. I did have a lot of wonderful discernment, but nothing about what I just shared. Although some parts of that sound pretty cool! But if you know me, you know I love tradition and I love this space and I get pretty attached to rituals!

I didn't have those visions but I hope...I hope whatever you started to feel as I was sharing those visions helps you tap into the feeling that Peter's fellow Jewish Christians might have been feeling when they found out Peter was eating with Gentiles! Peter, the long-standing disciple and faithful Jew who always ate kosher, was all the sudden eating with uncircumcised people who do NOT eat kosher.

Notice though Peter's Jewish Christian friends did not have a problem with Peter sharing the Good News with the Gentiles. That was fine. And, by the way, the Gentiles in this story are Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, and his household; you can read more of his story in Acts 10. Acts 10 gives a full blow by blow of Peter's vision with the

sheet and Cornelius' visit from the angel; this dual movement of the Holy Spirit where God was at work in two people's lives at the same time and brought them together and through that experience the Spirit showed the all that Gentiles are welcome in God's Story too, they are recipients of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Mutual confirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit is what separates Peter's vision from my pastoral vision I shared with you at the top of the service, by the way. Cornelius heard from God as well, and there was mutual discernment; a checks and balances. More on that in a bit.

Anyway, the point is, Peter's Jewish Christian contemporaries did NOT have an issue including the Gentiles in the Good News in theory, or in their mind or beliefs. They understood that God's grace was for Gentiles too. **The issue was NOT that God's blessing was for all people; *their* issue was the challenge that that blessing presented to them: change.**

All the sudden the practices that had defined their faith and identity forever and really meant something to them—the

practices that they hoped to invite new believers into with them so that they could receive the same benefits and connections with God that they had received—the practices that gave their life spiritual meaning...all the sudden those were being challenged by the Holy Spirit. And they had to grapple with the truth that THOSE specific practices were not the things that made them faithful to God. But it was God’s love and grace that fueled their faithfulness, and that could look different in different communities. And perhaps reveal something about God they didn’t know before. God was revealing to them that it was not about new folks joining them in doing things how they had always done them; it was about those who had always done things the same way sitting at the tables of new folks and experiencing God’s love, grace, and fellowship through their food and ways of communing together. Not holding so rigidly to rules and laws but embracing love.

In her book *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart*, Sister Joan Chittister

explains that we grow in love, and as we grow in love the laws and practices that express that love must change. change the way we need to love. She gives examples showing how the Hebrew Scriptures demonstrates that laws—concerning punishment, theft, slavery, even worship, for instance—changed from year to year, from situation to situation. The implication of this is important. As Love Grows, Laws Change. And she emphasizes that laws that cannot change with circumstances assure us of neither law nor order. If anything, rigid laws and practices do the opposite; they destroy love because they inhibit its growth.¹

So we have to be flexible with our “laws” and “practices” and long-beloved rituals to stay flexible to the movement of the Holy Spirit and new ways God is at work.

You know, the story of Peter and Cornelius is often titled a “Conversion Story” and it is. But usually people are referring to the conversion of Cornelius and certainly his coming to faith is a conversion to celebrate. But perhaps a more challenging

¹ Joan Chittister, *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), pages 137-139.

conversion, and one that speaks into our lives today, is the conversion that happens for the Jewish Christians—the ones who were faithful and who had always understood God and faith in one way, and now were challenged to see that That Way was not the only way. It was not wrong, but it was necessary for authentic faithful living. The love of God is far beyond one people group or even beyond the person of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, which is free and moving and falls on all people everywhere is now challenging us to see the blessing of God’s divine image in ALL people, even people very different than us.

In other words, had Peter said to Cornelius and his household, “awesome, y’all love Jesus too and worship our God now, come on back to Jerusalem and worship in our Temple and we’ll teach you how to cook kosher and we’ll circumcise you,” then his contemporaries and the Jewish Christian authorities would have been all about it.

They were ready to include others in their practices, but they were not ready to realize that this inclusion meant not always inviting people to *their* table,

but going to the table of others. Not always inviting folks to do things the way *they* had done them, but accepting others as they are for how they were doing things and even trying to doing things *their* way from time to time. Realizing that if the Holy Spirit had swept through their homes and lives as well, then it didn’t matter whether their food was kosher or not—what mattered was sitting at the table and eating with them and sharing about their mutual love for Jesus and their experiences about the Holy Spirit together. How God was working in their lives.

Have you ever sat down to play a card game and the person you are playing with plays by different rules? In that moment, do you insist your rules are the right way to play, or do you play by their rules, acknowledging that the point is not the rules of the game, but the playing of the game itself...spending time together. It’s not about the rules or who is right or who is wrong. It is about being together, laughing, loving, learning from one another.

But do you see how BIG this moment was for Peter and the other Jewish Christians? We read this story and it may not

feel very real to us today, but if we think of anything about our faith practices and traditions that we really love, and then imagine those things being gone...or if we have believed one thing for a long time and then all the sudden realize maybe that thing we believed isn't absolute truth, but just one angle of truth or one perspective...it's really hard to grapple with this and 'let go.'

Even Peter himself resisted this change in his vision. As he was told to eat one of the 'unclean' animals on this sheet he said, "*No way, I don't eat unclean foods,*" and the voice says back to him, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" And Peter is like, what? He struggles too. So he understands why his fellow Jewish Christians don't get it at first either. It's a lot of mental gymnastics to work through—believing one way for so long and now having to think in a new way.

But this is precisely the challenge for us today. The challenge that comes in the blessing of the Good News that is located at the end of the passage in verses 17 and 18. Let's break those done a bit more.

"If then God gave them—Them being the non-Jewish or "gentile" Roman Centurion Cornelius and his household—*the same gift that God gave us—Us* being the circumcised, kosher eating, law-abiding Jewish followers of Jesus who had recently been doused with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—

"If then God gave THEM the same gift he gave US," Peter asked, "who was I that I could hinder God?"

And this question stops them in their tracks.

*When they—*they being the circumcised, kosher eating, law-abiding Jewish followers of Jesus recently doused with the Holy Spirit—*heard THIS—this,* being the question about who are they to hinder God—*they were silenced.*

You might say that they needed some processing time. Or, as our friends from the Center for Contemplative Living might say, they needed a "sit." They took time for Centering Prayer. They sat silently to let God speak. They listened to the Holy, to the Divine, to perhaps what Howard Thurman calls "the sound of the genuine," and discerned—does this ring true?

What Peter is saying? What Cornelius experienced? Do we feel this is the way the Spirit is moving too? You see, it was *communal discernment*. Not just a word from their leader. They heard what he said, but they discerned as well.

And lo and behold—they DID discern in like manner to Peter and Cornelius. The Spirit confirmed its new movement through the Jewish Christians as well.

They then praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles—that, is, even to Cornelious the Roman Centurion and his people, the people who are not Jewish, who do not follow Jewish law, who do not eat kosher, who are not circumcised—

“Then God has given even to the Gentiles—the Gentiles being You and Me, folks!...we who call ourselves Christian today...

“Then God has given even to ALL PEOPLE now, not just Jews the repentance—that is, the metanoia, which is the Greek word often translated as

repentance, but that actually means “beyond mind”... *meta* meaning “beyond”; *noia* meaning “mind.” Which I like to think of anything that is “mind blowing” ☺ but essentially the idea of “beyond mind” expresses the idea of gaining a new mind-set, a new way of thinking and acting, a new orientation to life. To repent really means to start thinking and acting in a radically different way²—almost like making a 180 re-orientation with your perspective.

“Then God has given even to ALL PEOPLE—to YOU and to ME as well—the metanoia, the Changed Mindset, the New Way of Thinking and Acting—that leads to life—the word for life in the Greek here being, zōē³, which means the state of vitality that animates every soul; the absolute fullness of life, both essential and ethical. Isn’t that beautiful!?! That the gift God wants to give all of us is the gift of a changed mind, a new perspective that leads us to fuller animation of soul, and more fullness and vitality of life?

² John Schwiebert, "10 Practices for Emergent Churches" accessed on May 18, 2025 at <https://www.thepeacehouse.org/about-metanoia>.

³ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2222/kjv/tr/0-1/>

“Who am I to hinder God?”—indeed that is THE question when the hindering keeps our souls from flourishing and our minds from opening.

To which, after their own discernment, Peters’ fellow Jews who had always done things one way said, *“Wow. Point taken. Well, then, I guess God has given to All People, even those people worshipping at 6500 E. Girard Avenue in Denver, Colorado on 18th of May in the year Two Thousand Twenty Five of our Lord—the Changed Mindset, the New Perspective that leads to an animated soul, vitality, the fullness of life.”*

This is the Good News, my friends. It doesn’t get any better than this: The God who we read about in Genesis, our Creator who created *every* living thing calling it Good and who breathed *ruach*—*spirit, breath, life*—into humanity and called it Good...and the God who is worshipped on the throne in the book of Revelation, by *quote* *“a multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language,”* (Rev. 7:9)—God, Alpha and Omega—from Beginning to End—God has always included ALL of us in The Story, the

Divine has always wanted for all of us Goodness and Vitality and Blessing and Fullness of Life. That is the Good News. There is no one left out of God’s Love, no one excluded from God’s embrace, no one side-stepped or side-swiped out of God’s story, no one who is not gathered up within God’s grace.

This is no secret. This has been the Truth from the Beginning, it is the Truth that will still be standing at the End.

But, of course, we forget this. In our humanity and in our small fields of vision, which get smaller and smaller the more that we fear—and the world gives all kinds of reasons to fear and fear and fear some more, particularly fearing people who are different than us, who may somehow be a ‘threat’ to us—yes, it’s because of this smaller field of vision, it’s because of our narrowing perspectives, and fearful mindsets that set in without us even knowing that they’re setting in because of what we’ve been taught and what we’ve grown up thinking is right and wrong, that we, like Peter’s faithful, rule-following, Jewish siblings who are circumcised and eat kosher, must always ask ourselves, ***“Who are we to hinder God?”***

And why is it that we seem to hinder God so often? Because we have to be real with ourselves when we read this text. Most of us in the room are no longer the “Gentiles” in this story. If we hold privilege and place in our understanding of who we are in God’s Story, that we are blessed and included in the Circle of God’s Grace, then we are no longer the “new believers” needing to be welcomed; we are now, in this story, the long established Jewish Christians...the ones needing to be challenged...needing to have our perspectives changed and our mindsets shifted.

So what group of people is really hard for us to understand? What group is a struggle for us to include?

“Yes, I guess EVEN to the Gentiles—even to That Group of People that I Can’t Understand and Does Not Interpret Faith or Practice Life as I Do—even to That Group—the gift of *metanoia* (of change mind/perspective) is possible, and that will lead them, and all of us, to Life, animated, vital *zoe*, fullness of life.

God has given the blessing of God’s Spirit, Love, and Grace,

to ALL people. The Challenge for us in this Blessing for All, is that including more people means change for those of us who have already been included. And change is hard. Many, many times we are ready to state that we believe something, before we are ready or okay with actually acting on it in our lived experience and lives.

Yesterday, I was at the funeral for the Rev. Dr. James D. Peters, Jr.—social and civil rights activist with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., founding member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), social and civic leader here in Denver for decades, and thirty-year tenured Pastor Emeritus of our sister church New Hope Baptist. A remarkable man with a remarkable story. As his daughter Pam talked about the times when she would be on the road with her father, helping to raise money for HBCUs, Historic Black Colleges and Universities, and they would drive through certain towns in certain places, and they would have to sleep freezing in their car because no hotel would let them stay there because they were black, she remembered her father not fighting with the hotel

managers when they wouldn't take his money, and even when he said, my daughters are freezing out in the car, he wouldn't fight, he would just stand their at the counter and start praying. Praying for the people who ran the hotel. And the story reminded me of some of our own Calvary members and saints, Mildred and John Smith and their four kids. And the stories they shared with me as a military family. John was a graduate of Tuskegee and a Colonel in the United States Air Force for 25 years. He served our country valiantly and was stationed, at times, overseas. When the family was on furlough here in the United States, and they would travel, he, too, had the same experience as Pastor Peters. Going from hotel to motel, trying to find a place to let his family rest overnight. And often not finding one. So the family slept in the car. The children say their father would never say, when they were young, why they couldn't go inside the motels—he later would share he didn't want them to have a bad feeling about white people or hold this experience against white folks—so he would just say they were going to have an 'adventure' and sleep over night in the car. My my. Is this not an

example of what we are reading about in the text today? Here was a country where we would allow African Americans to serve in the military and protect our freedoms and die for us, but when they are with their families seeking a place to rest at night, they are not accepted because they are black. The words were in writing. Desegregation was law. But the words don't mean anything if the practice is not there to back it up. And no one was holding these businesses accountable for continuing to segregate and discriminate and dehumanize.

The words were voted on, but the actions not yet upheld because the hearts were not yet changed; *we're still working on that aren't we?*

Likewise, it reminds of me to the stories of many women in ministry, and even my own story, as a young minister searching for my first call. I would apply for churches who said, in writing to their Regions and Search Committees, that they believed it was okay for women to be ministers, and they supported that theology and biblical understanding of women in ministry, and they might even take the resumes and applications of women

candidates, but behind closed doors the conversations were clear—they, themselves, and their church, well they could not call a woman to be a pastor—it was just not the right time for them...or the right fit. It might be good for other churches, but not them. Never mind that these churches were run by all the women who do all the things in the church behind the scenes. It was okay in theory, but not in practice.

Sounds like the early church, right? Wanting to change and accepting a view of accepting women in ministry, just as the Jewish Christians accepted Gentile Believers, but when it came to sharing in life with them, I mean really sharing in life, as in eating at their tables, or in this case, having a woman in their pulpit or praying at their bedside or making decisions about their bylaws, well, that was hard. Why was it hard? Because it meant change.

Many of us struggle to accept change, perhaps because it is uncomfortable and unfamiliar. And so rather than actually call a woman to be a pastor, we'll put out the brochures about women in ministry and send in money to organizations that support women in ministry, but

we just won't try one for ourselves.

I also thought this week of when Calvary voted on our Inclusion Statement on December 4, 2011. We voted to 'welcome and affirm all people as children of God from every cultural and religious background, sexual orientation, family composition, physical and mental ability, economic means, race, age, and gender. This was putting in writing something that our congregation had been practicing in various ways for a while. I distinctly remember having a conversation with a member who said, "Well, this statement is okay and I support it, but if we start doing anything to act on it, if we join the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists or if we go to PRIDEfest well then that would be too much." In exploring this thought with the person I dug deeper. Well, that's kind of the point I said. I be able to have this statement in writing so that we could fully embody it in the world. And as we discussed it it turns out his real issues wasn't with the LGBTQIA+ community at all, it was about the outreach to them because he was afraid all the sudden he would look around the church and not recognize

“his church” anymore or feel like he knew anyone. And I said, don’t you see? The very feeling that you are fearing...not being able to see yourself in these pews, is the very thing that our siblings in the queer community need? To be able to walk into these pews and see themselves represented and to see themselves as part of a community? I said, the pews are doing to change. People will die, move away, move on. But don’t you want these pews to be full of people who are authentically on the journey of faith with you too? The challenge is not our W&A inclusion statement; the challenge is just realizing that society is very different now and less people go to church and our frustration about our friends not coming to church is no reason not to go out and welcome people who have been longing for church for a long time. They need our welcome and embrace. And we need them to further understand the fullness of the image of God, the *imago dei* (yes, D.E.I.)

It was a powerful conversation that explored how hard change is and how sometimes we misplace our fear on people who do not have anything to do with our fear, versus grappling with

the deeper spiritual layers of how the Spirit is moving in our lives and in the world.

I have a feeling, that much of our resistance to any kind of inclusion or acceptance or more expansive view of God’s love and embrace for all people is always rooted in our own fear. And often we resist in others what we fear in ourselves. That we, ourselves, will change. That we ARE changing.

But change is always coming because God’s very nature is change, is *metanoia*, a moving, active Holy Spirit in our lives. So God is changing; that’s a given. The question is, are we changing with God’s moving spirit or are we hindering our own growth and the growth of others?

Metanoia, going “beyond our mind” and turning around, or changing direction is so very hard. It’s a lifelong process. And, it’s the process that leads to Fullness of Life. Vitality. Not just for you, but for all people. We are to be always repenting, or metanoia-ing. Which means, always changing our mind, always changing direction, being flexible, agile, rethinking.

And changing our minds or changing our practices or ways of doing things is not heretical to the ways of God; it is actually inherent in how God works in the world. God sends a sweeping spirit through the people and the Book of Acts is us watching the early church being born, changed mind by changed belief by changed practice by changed understanding and looping back again and again. More and more people are included in that blessing. And those who have been included all along, are challenged.

The more that we understand God's blessing is for all people—the more we will be challenged in how we practice and live out God's blessing for all. Because for all to be welcome means that there are more people at the table and our table rules may not necessarily apply.

God's Blessing is for All People. And that will always be Challenging for us. It is a challenge to open ourselves to how God is working in the lives of other people—especially people very different than us. We will be challenged to have to let go of some of our ways of doing things. We will have to

think different and allow our minds to be changed. We will have to stop resisting that which make us uncomfortable, and welcome discomfort as the challenge that leads us closer to Christ. And we'll have to spend time—real time, slow time, silent time, prayerful time—discerning.

Peter had been 'right' for so many years. So had these faithful Jewish Christians. Or so they thought. They had done things faithfully in certain ways for so many ways that had brought them closer to God. And then—God spoke anew. Not eradicating all that had been, but opening up new pathways and new people that would expand their understanding of just how FULL life could be, how animated their souls could be, how re-vitalized their community could be.

Calvary, God has given EVEN to you and to me the change of mind/the new perspective that will lead us to new life—to fullness of life, animation of soul, vitality of community.

Who are we to hinder God?

Amen.