

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, April 24, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6
“Words trustworthy and true”

Sometimes, when I sit down to write a sermon, it can head off in a very different direction from what I anticipated when I chose the title a few weeks before. This is one of those occasions. So please don't feel bad if you can't find a connection between today's sermon and the title in the bulletin. I can't find one either.

It may be one of the most bizarre stories in Scripture. Not the most bizarre – Ezekiel's rather nightmarish vision of dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones coming together with a rattling and breath coming into them, and standing up on their feet, has got it beat for bizarreness.

Peter had a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, containing all sorts of animals that Jewish law prohibited as food – four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, birds of the air, that kind of thing. He heard a voice telling him to “Get up ... kill and eat,” and rebuking him for his self-righteous reply that “... *for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*” Three times it happened, and three times he was told that “*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*”

Of course, the story was all about the struggle that the early church faced over who could be part of the church, who was included in the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. Up to that point, Gentiles, non-Jews, people of other races, had historically been excluded from the chosen race. They could not be part of God's covenant people.

But in Jesus Christ, the disciples had seen the love of God offered freely to all, no matter what their racial background, ethnicity or even faith. And in the first Christian Pentecost, the Spirit of God had empowered the disciples to share the good news of the Gospel in the languages of all the people gathered in Jerusalem. I won't list them all, but Acts 2 says that people of 15 nationalities heard in their own languages the disciples speaking about God's deeds of power. What did that mean to the followers of Jesus Christ? How exclusive or how inclusive should their community be? Who was in and who was out?

Of course, we know what the outcome was. Peter realised, and the early church realised, and though we have not always lived up to what we say, the church ever since has agreed with the words of Acts 11 that “*What God has made clean, you must not call profane*” ... ¹²*The Spirit told me ... not to make a distinction between them and us ... God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.*

Inclusion or exclusion. Welcome or unwelcome. In or out. These are still issues for us as a church and for us as a nation. Once again, I was struck by the timeliness of how the Lectionary text can speak today, given events in our community and our nation.

Event #1: the City's response to the report of the Mayor's Advisory Panel on Poverty was featured in the London Free Press on Wednesday. The panel is made up of representatives from

Western University, City council, the United Way, the Middlesex-London Health Unit, the London Homeless Coalition and the London Food Bank. Their report makes 112 recommendations for what can be done to address poverty levels in London. It focuses on eight areas to be addressed in the next year. These include

- Changing mindsets: a campaign to educate and engage the community on poverty
- Income and employment: the establishment of a living wage figure for London
- Health: the creation of a co-ordinated local mental health, addictions strategy
- Homelessness prevention and housing: engaging landlords to keep more people housed
- Transportation: letting children under 12 ride London Transit for free
- Early learning and education: adding licensed child-care spaces
- Food security: supporting the development of food policy council
- System change: getting people who live in poverty involved in democratic institutions

Why does this matter? Because 24% of youth and children in London in 2012 lived in low-income households, compared with 20% provincially. And because 17% of London households considered low income in 2012, compared to 15% provincially. These are not statistics that we can be proud of as Londoners. Inclusion or exclusion. Welcome or unwelcome. In or out. These are poverty-related questions.

Event #2: I dropped into Northern Hospitality at St Michael and All Angels Church on Monday – it was our night to host. I hadn't been there since Christmas, and I have to say I was shocked to see so many guests there. Our team served 122 people. On a fine night towards the end of April.

What shocked me more than that was the number of children there with their parents. I think I saw three families, with maybe half a dozen children. Not a lot, you may say. But even one hungry child, even one hungry adult, is too many. Inclusion or exclusion. Welcome or unwelcome. In or out. These are hunger-related questions.

Event #3: the situation in Attawapiskat First Nation. On Friday, April 8, the band council declared a state of emergency, giving as their reason the 11 suicide attempts they had seen so far in April and the 28 recorded attempts they had seen in March. The reserve has seen 100 attempts since last September. Seven of those involved people under 14, and 43 of them involved people under 25. It seems that the federal government is sitting up and taking notice of the crisis, but it remains to be seen what, if anything, will be done to address poor housing, foul water, chronic unemployment, substance abuse and general despair in the community. As a middle-class, male Caucasian, I find it hard to believe that anyone in Canada should be living in conditions that drive young children to consider suicide as a real option. But they are. And I think once again, inclusion or exclusion. Welcome or unwelcome. In or out. For too many first nation people, especially for too many first nation young people, these are not just poverty-related, not just hunger-related, but meaning of life-related questions.

These are big questions, and big issues to deal with. None of us is going to resolve them alone. So what can we do? Maybe it's like the story of the boy who was on a beach. He picked up a starfish that had been stranded by the tide, carefully carried it into the water and let it go. Someone told him that he shouldn't waste his time, because he couldn't help all the starfish that had been stranded. He replied, "But I could help that one."

A few weeks ago, each of our church school students was given \$10 and asked to do something to help other people. Let me tell you what some of them did. As I do, ask yourself what their actions say to us about inclusion or exclusion, welcome or unwelcome, in or out.

- Liam and James both gave their ten dollars to the Camp Kintail campership fund, because they love going to camp and feel everyone, regardless of means, should go, too.
- Isla gave her ten dollars to our Lenten Back to Basics project to provide socks and underwear to Unity Project, Quintin Warner House, Merrymount and Rotholme. She was particularly concerned that it be used to help children, especially new Canadians like her Syrian friends at school, because, in her words, "God loves everybody, and He wants us to love everybody, too, and to help."
- Daniel gave his ten dollars to the London Ecumenical Refugee Committee.
- Mary Wah and Samuel Wah each gave their ten dollars to the Karen Sunday School at First Baptist Church so that the children could have snacks during church school time.
- Jack and Owen used their ten dollars to buy toques for their uncle who has cancer. You can't tell he's losing his hair any more.

To which I say: thanks be to God for people like that!