

Over the last month, I've been a part of two "Get to Know Your Pastor," where those who've come shared the story of how they came to Covenant, and it's been such an honor to hear those stories. I don't know if you are used to thinking of your life as a story, with a plot and characters, but learning to do this with my life has been some of the most healing work I've ever done. I'm convinced that if we truly hear one another's stories, we will find our way back to one another. In Frederick's Buechner's memoir *Telling Secrets*, he writes, "My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours. Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from."

When I tell the story of why I became a pastor, I go back to when our family moved from the Chicago suburbs to Centerville, Ohio in 1991 just before my 7th grade year. That move was one of the most painful events of my life. Our family had moved before, and I had changed schools before, but the move to Centerville was different. I have these vivid bodily memories of walking around the school yard by myself, with no one to look at, much less talk to. Though it didn't remain that acutely painful, the truth is that from 7th-12th grade I experienced a level of social exclusion that I don't wish upon anyone. And what was strange about it was that I don't think it was personal or intentional. People just didn't see me for whatever reason. Centerville is similar to Upper Arlington, where those who belong here often love it, but if you didn't grow up here, it may not feel as welcoming. Walking around the school yard by myself in 7th grade, that's when I began praying to Jesus. Jesus became my friend when no one else was, and thankfully I had my church too. Church is where I experienced love and belonging. I don't care who you are or what you believe, we all need love and belonging. So, when I thought about what I wanted to do with my life, it was a no-brainer. I wanted to be a part of a community that says even if the rest of world excludes you, here you belong. Here you are seen for who you are and loved just as you are. That's why I became a pastor.

Today we hear an incredible story from the book of Acts, and it's a story that may seem like no big deal to us, but to the first century church it was a scandalous account of how far love goes. In Acts 11, Peter is criticized by the Jerusalem church for daring to enter the home of a Gentile and eating with them. Now we hear than and think what's was the fuss about? Why was the early church so closed minded and xenophobic? After all, it was Jesus who told them they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and even to the remotest parts of the earth. Did these Jewish Christians really think they wouldn't rub shoulders with Gentiles along the way? Of course, they did. They knew that God loves Gentiles. That wasn't the issue. The issue was, how do we love people that our faith tells us to remain separate from?

You see the Bible is quite clear on what makes a person unclean. If you look up Leviticus 11 and read the food laws, you will see it's not ambiguous. There are certain unclean foods God forbade Jews to eat, and by extension there are certain unclean people with whom you must keep a distance. It wasn't personal and wasn't meant to be hateful. It's just what faith calls them to do. And for all Jesus' talk about loving one another, he never said, "By the way, when I'm gone, you can forget all those laws about clean and unclean in the Bible. Those no longer apply!" He never said that. He simply told us to love one another, and then he left it up to us to figure out how far that love goes.

It's no surprise the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were upset with Peter. In response, Peter tells his story. He doesn't engage in debate over scriptural interpretation. He simply describes what happened to him. He had an ecstatic vision and found himself in a thin place where heaven and earth became one. In this vision, he saw a giant sheet with all these animals on it, animals that the Bible calls unclean. Then Peter hears a voice saying, "Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!" "No way!" Peter responds. "I'll never eat anything that will make me unclean." The voice responds to Peter, "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." I believe these are some of the most important and overlooked words in all of scripture. Peter's vision completely deconstructs the categories of clean and unclean, insider and outsider, and suddenly we discover there's room at God's table for people who had previously been excluded, and that which previously divided us, no longer does.

After this incredible vision, Peter takes what he's learned about food, and he applies it to people. In fact, in chapter 10 he says, "God has shown me that I should never call a person impure or unclean." Imagine if the church had followed this advice. How different would our history be if followers of Jesus Christ simply refused to call or treat anyone as impure or unclean, no matter who they are or what they've done? This vision leads Peter to go where he otherwise would not, into the home of a Gentile, and when he does, he discovers the Spirit of God was with these Gentiles too, and they are all baptized into the same faith, all part of the one body of Christ.

Peter tells this story, and those who had criticized him suddenly have a change of heart. What we discover is that it wasn't simply the Gentiles who were converted that day. Peter and the Jewish Christians were as well. They discovered that grace was so much bigger than they imagined, so much bigger than even the scriptures had previously revealed. If they were to follow where the Spirit was leading, they needed to let go of their old understandings of who God was and what the scriptures require and trust that love goes to the very people we thought were unclean and left out. The church is meant to be a place where the categories of insider and outsider, clean and unclean, gloriously fade away, a community that says even if the rest of world excludes you, here you belong. Here you are seen for who you are and loved just as you are. That's exactly what I discovered in church when I needed it most, and that's why inclusion is so important to me. It's not a side issue or a church growth strategy. It's central to the heart of the gospel.

I'm convinced that if we truly hear one another's stories, we will find our way back to one another, and all of us have a story. Two weeks ago, Brian Ellison was here, and like Peter he shared stories, stories of queer people who have come to the church seeking welcome but instead experienced exclusion. There's a place for discussions about what the scriptures say about sexual orientation and gender identity, and we've had those discussions, but in the end it's stories that change us, not debates. While our church has been focused specifically on the LGBTQIA+ community, how many others also find themselves left out in our community, people of color, people with disabilities, the neurodiverse, people who for whatever reason we just don't see...are we willing to hear the stories of those who don't already belong? Often times exclusion is not personal or intentional, but unless we are willing to hear the stories of those who've been left out, we may miss the very people the Spirit is calling us toward. Jesus calls us to love each other as he loved us, and that we will be known not by our doctrine or our budgets, not by our great music or good preaching, but by our love. And he left it up to us to

determine how far love goes. What I know for certain is this: God's love for you knows no boundary or limit. God sees you and names you clean, pure, and beloved. Here you belong. Here you are loved just as you are, the whole of your story. Here we are one body, connected across all our differences. I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.