

The United Church of Moscow
Hannah Brown
July 12, 2026

Acts of the Ordinary: Peter and Cornelius
Acts 10:25-48

The Spirit is at work through ordinary inclusion

Gospel

The first line of our church's mission and purpose statement says that we are a "community that lives out Jesus's teachings." This is a way of talking about our activity, our foundation.

Even those among us who have a hard time adopting some of the more "churchy" language, or who debate about the finer points of our faith, rally behind the ways of Jesus. Christ is our center, our foundation, our reason for calling ourselves a church. We are a community that strives to live out the teachings of Jesus.

So, what are Jesus's teachings? What does it mean to live and follow in the ways of Christ?

When Peter is asked this question in Acts 10, the Message translation says in v.34 that he "nearly exploded with the good news."

We use that terminology a lot in church spaces - "good news" or "gospel." It's the same word in Greek; it's an ancient word that people used to announce a military victory or royal announcement. So when we think of the phrase, "the good news of Jesus" or "the gospel of Jesus," it would be right for us to think,

"What is it about Jesus's life, death, and resurrection that is a victory? That is worth celebrating? That is truly good news?"

Inclusion

For Peter, the victory of Jesus begins with a message of inclusion; this is the message that is nearly exploding out him - he says, "God shows no partiality, no favoritism; 'God is a respecter of persons.'" God's heart is for people, all people. This is where the good news of Jesus starts - that everyone is included in this massive celebration.

Last weekend, two massive celebrations happened in our country:

America celebrated 250 years of existence. This is worth celebrating! With friends, community, food, and fireworks. But... not everyone is celebrating. America and its existence has not been "good news" for every country in the world, and those like our indigenous neighbors can tell you exactly how America's creation was actually bad news for them.

Even the massive celebration of America's 250th year is not good news for everyone.

Also last weekend - The world's most famous popstar, Taylor Swift married NFL superstar, Travis Kelce. Their wedding was a massive celebration, taking place at Madison Square Garden, and celebrated with over 1,000 people in attendance. However, despite this being an event that fans worldwide were

celebrating online, the details of the event were super exclusive, with almost no pictures of details of the event being public. For fans hoping to share in the joy of their day, the exclusive nature of the event is disappointing and frustrating. And for business owners who lost out on business that day due to the event shutting down public access to their businesses, they certainly weren't celebrating.

Even the massive celebration of the world's most famous popstar is not good news for everyone.

But the life and ways of Jesus are not like these celebrations. The ways of Jesus are not exclusive to a certain group of people, they are not "good news" to only a select few. The celebration is open to everyone.

However, this type of celebration is uncommon to us. We don't know what it is to have "good news" that is truly good news for everyone. We can't even picture it. The most exciting celebrations we can think of, don't even compare.

Which is why Peter calls this type of celebration, this good news, "highly irregular."

See, Jews did not associate with people outside of their race and religion very often. It was considered unlawful, unwise, or illogical. Because the people had nothing in common with one another - and the Jewish laws wanted the Jewish people to remain set apart from other people so they could be set apart for God.

In other words, the Jewish people were supposed to set themselves apart so that they could better know and serve God. So, they separated themselves from outsiders - they didn't talk with them often, they didn't go into their houses, and they certainly didn't eat with them. The logic is that by secluding themselves from outside influences, they were able to focus on God more.

I wonder if you've ever felt pressured to take on this same exclusionary mentality - scared of comingling w/those who have different ideas, opinions, or religions. When I was growing up, I was told not to read certain books or watch certain films or engage with certain people because their ideas might contaminate mine. And their influence could lead to a "slippery slope" where I lost my faith altogether.

Peter was taught the same thing growing up - as a Jewish man, there's certain company that you don't associate with because their influence could cause you to lose your faith. Fraternizing with outsiders is a slippery slope to losing your faith.

But just before this, in verses 8-17, we read the story of Peter having a vision. In this vision, God completely challenges this exclusionary mindset. In verse 17, the Spirit tells Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In other words, if God says it's okay to commingle, then you shouldn't be afraid to do so.

And so Peter, for the first time, maybe ever, finds himself at Cornelius's house, the house of a gentile. He's being asked to go against everything he's been taught, engaging with the people he's been told to fear, and comingling with a new people, new culture, new race, and new religious expression. Highly irregular, indeed - and yet, this is the good news of Jesus.

The spirit is at work through ordinary inclusion.

But, even more surprising, when Peter engages with a group of people considered outsiders of the faith, what he finds is not a "slippery slope" away from faith, but a slippery slope toward greater fulfillment of the faith.

See, Peter and the Jews that are gathered with him, not only get to share their faith with the outsiders they've been taught to fear, but they become the recipients of the outsiders' expression of faith too. V. 44 - The Spirit of God falls upon every Gentile present and they begin speaking back to the Jewish people - praising God and worshipping.

Through the actions of those outside the faith, the people inside the faith are able to understand their own faith better and to see their own faith demonstrated in an unprecedented way. The Spirit at work through the Gentiles is a reminder that God has always been at work *through* people not *in spite* of them.

God works through our lives, our experiences, our perspectives, so that in community, we might better understand who God is and better reflect the characteristics and actions of God. God is not moving past the Jews to get to the Gentiles, rather God is pulling them both together, toward each other, reminding them that both are needed, both are included, both can learn from one another.

Priest and Practical Theologian, Fr. Joash P. Thomas says,

"Every pocket of the global church has blind spots. This means we all need each other's eyes to see more clearly so that we can be faithful in the present."(Joash, The Justice of Jesus, 15).

When we learn to listen to one another, even those we might disagree with, we gain a new understanding of faith and experience a fresh perspective of God at work.

I wonder: what might God be trying to teach you that you are unable to hear because it comes from the mouth of someone you've been told not to listen to, you've been taught to fear, or you've been told to avoid?

The Spirit is at work through ordinary inclusion.

But inclusion is only the first part of the good news. The good news of Jesus is not only a message of WHO is included, but of WHAT they might accomplish together.

Justice

When Peter proclaims inclusion, he couples it with justice - in v.35, the NRSV translation says that anyone who "practices righteousness" or "who acts justly" is acceptable to God, is truly walking in the ways of Jesus.

If the good news of Jesus is one that shows no partiality, no favoritism, no exclusion, then following in the ways of Jesus demands that we see and care for those who feel the weight of partiality, favoritism, and exclusion. those left behind or overlooked by society; those who are the victims of injustice. If the gospel of Jesus is equally good news for everyone, then we must begin to see the people who are treated unequally in our world, and care for them the way that God commands them to be cared for.

In other words, the work of inclusion and justice are not secondary to the gospel of Jesus, they are the core of the gospel of Jesus.

We do not get to decide through whom Jesus will work, nor do we get to deny our neighbors equality and continue to call ourselves followers of Christ. Jesus is here to make ALL things right through ALL people.

The Spirit is at work through ordinary inclusion because it leads to extraordinary demonstrations of justice.

This is why Jesus himself, at the very beginning of his ministry, quotes a passage from Isaiah and claims it as the purpose for his ministry:

Luke 4:18-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

If the message we preach and the faith we live out is not good news for the poor, freedom for the captive, recovery of sight for the blind, and liberation for the oppressed, then our gospel is not the gospel of Jesus.

If the faith we are living out is not good news for everyone, then the faith we are living out is not one rooted in Jesus, because Jesus is good news for everyone.

The Spirit is at work through ordinary inclusion because it leads to extraordinary demonstrations of justice.

Inclusion is necessary to the good news of Jesus because Justice is necessary to the good news of Jesus. You cannot have one without the other, and you cannot lose both and continue to claim it is Jesus’s good news.

Now, I know what you might be thinking: Everyone? Hannah, have you met everyone?! There are people in this world who have done awful, horrific, tragic things. Surely, everyone doesn’t deserve justice.

We like to think the work of justice is limited to those who are most vulnerable and oppressed. And certainly, our work should begin with them. But injustice is harmful to everyone; it harms both the oppressed and the oppressor. Both are in need of restoration.

Fr. Joash says this about justice:

“Justice is giving each person their due...Justice is giving to each person the good things that God intended for them. For the survivor of violence, that’s healing and restoration. And for the perpetrator of violence, that’s accountability for the purpose of restoration.” (Joash, The Justice of Jesus, 22)

See, the work of justice is tied to restoration - that we will all be restored to a right relationship with God and with one another. This is what Peter reminds us of in v.36 - that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again and he’s doing it everywhere, among everyone.

The work of justice is not to decide who is worthy of the good news, the celebration of liberation found in Jesus. The work of justice is tied with the work of inclusion, meaning that everyone receives the justice of Jesus. Everyone is being “put together again” through Jesus. And while some may require more accountability than others, restoration is the goal for all people - it is not up for us to decide otherwise.

This is why Peter includes this comment in his description of the good news of Jesus:

V. 42 - “He is in fact the One whom God destined as Judge of the living and dead.”

We have never been the judge. It is not our job to judge who’s “in” and who’s “out;” who is worthy to join the celebration of Jesus and receive inclusion and justice. It is our job to practice the inclusion of Jesus for the sake of justice for everyone.

Do you have faith enough to actually let God be the judge? And to keep practicing ordinary inclusion for the sake of justice, to whomever it leads you to?

The Spirit is at work through ordinary inclusion because it leads to extraordinary demonstrations of justice.

May we be a people that practice ordinary inclusion in our own lives, and in this church, so that the Spirit might do extraordinary acts of justice in and through us.