



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Spiritual Community"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
in the Season of Pentecost, on June 11, 2023, from Acts 10*

How does a white, suburban, middle-class American boy raised in a devout family of Methodist ministers grow up and decide to become a soldier in the U.S. Army? How do white, God-fearing parents, who were hippies that protested the Vietnam war, casually allow their oldest son to enlist to protect and defend America against all enemies foreign and domestic? The answer to both questions is "Christian nationalism." When I was seventeen, I joined the military imagining I was offering my life in sacrificial service to "God and Country." I saw no difference or contradiction between giving my life to Jesus and giving my life to America; in my mind, they were one and the same. For most Americans, our conflation of "God and Country" begins at a very young age.

I raised in a church where an American flag graced the chancel and patriotic messages were delivered every Fourth of July. I was a member of the Boy Scouts of America whose highest award was the "God and Country" merit badge symbolized by a square knot. For me and millions of Americans, God and Country were tied together in our most formative years. What it meant to be an American was synonymous with what it meant to be Christian. So, when received my commission as an officer in the U.S. Army, I was proud to become an American centurion.

Centurions are commanders of military units consisting of 100 soldiers, and I'll never forget the day I became an American centurion—the day I started as the officer of the first troop I was given to command. I was 21 years old, fresh out of military school, filled with book knowledge and a tiny amount of experience in the field, eager and excited, but wet behind the ears. The first person I encountered was my platoon sergeant Sgt. Williams, the highest-ranking enlisted soldier who would be my top direct report. He was a strong African American man in his fifties, with 20 years of service, who'd fought in every major American conflict since Grenada as an airborne infantry soldier parachuting out of planes into enemy territory. My first day he pulled me aside and said, "Lieutenant, here's how things are going to go. I'm going to tell you what we're going to do, then you're going to tell the soldiers what to do, and then we're going to go do it. Does that work for you?" I replied, "Yes, sergeant."



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Sgt. Williams taught me everything and over time I gained more experience as an American centurion. But there was something else going on in my life. While I was pursuing my own path—a career as an American centurion, God’s Spirit was pursuing me with completely different intentions. A few weeks ago, Callie Day sang “I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name. Jesus told me the world would be against me if I changed my name. But I told Jesus, it would be alright if he changed my name.” Her song took me back to when I was in college studying religion and serving as an officer in the National Guard and 9/11 happened. That was the crucial point in my life when I realized the Spirit was searching for me, chasing me, trying to give me a new calling and a new name, to change me from 2nd Lieutenant to follower of Jesus, from American centurion to Christian Pastor.

At three o’clock in the afternoon—the exact same time Jesus died on the cross surrounded by soldiers; a Roman centurion named Cornelius stationed in Caesarea found out that the Spirit was searching for him, chasing him, trying to catch him to give to give him a new name and a new calling. And not just any God, but the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Miriam and Moses, the God of Israel somehow knew Cornelius by name. Not only did God know Cornelius’s name, but called out to him and said, “I’ve heard your prayers, I’ve seen your generosity, I’ve been searching for you, I’ve found you, and now I need you to go find a man named Peter.”

Here’s a little secret for the Bible Geeks. Cornelius wasn’t his real name. 82 years before the birth of Jesus, a brilliant yet brutal military general named Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix, who went by the nickname Sulla, conquered Rome. And to maintain order and protect himself, Sulla freed 10,000 slaves, enlisted them, armed them, and stationed them within the walls of the city as his own Praetorian Guard. Then in an act of true arrogance, he renamed them all after himself. That’s right, he gave all 10,000 slaves the name Cornelius and called his special Army the Corneli. So, when God called out to the centurion saying, “Cornelius!”, God was not just calling him by his given name, God was calling his vocation and occupation because they were one in the same. According to the empire he had no identity outside of his position. To Rome he was a centurion, nothing else, but to God Cornelius, was so much more.



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In the eyes of Peter and the early church Cornelius was the enemy. Even though Jesus had a powerful encounter with a centurion from Capernaum in the gospel of Matthew and praised his faith, somehow the message of inclusion for centurions had not filtered down to the apostles. Or perhaps the disciples thought Jesus being crucified at the hands of Roman soldiers meant they were no longer fit for the kingdom.

Or perhaps, like so many of us today, they knew Jesus had crossed this boundary, but they decided to hold on to their prejudices anyway. Old hatreds, like old habits, die hard. But the Spirit won't let well enough alone. The Spirit won't leave Peter or Cornelius alone. The Spirit won't leave us alone. It will not abandon us, and it will not stop pestering us with the good news of God's new creation, the good news of inclusion. That's the Spirit's number one job—making community.

The Spirit is always out in front of the church, beyond the margins of the established community, working to draw in more and more people into the Spirit's tether. The Spirit is a transgressor who crosses lines, breaks laws, tears down walls, pushes through boundaries that separate and segregate groups of people from each other. The Spirit is a transgressor who crosses all the artificial borders we have established to create more inclusive communities. The Spirit is a transgressor who transgresses for the church. Yes, you've heard the Spirit is an intercessor who speaks for us when we don't have the will or the words to pray, but the Spirit is also a transgressor who transgresses anything and everything necessary to break down the barriers to beloved community. The Spirit transgresses boundaries to draw people into the fold like Cornelius the Roman centurion.

Why? Because we matter more to God than we matter to the empire. We matter more to God than we matter to this country. We matter more to God than we matter to our employers, our clients, our jobs, our occupations. We matter more to God than we matter to our churches. We matter more to God than we matter to our families and friends. We matter more to God than we matter to our spouses and children. We matter more to God than we matter to each other. Even if we are a Roman centurion, God still hears our prayers. Even if we are outside the church, God still sees our generosity. Even if we are considered unclean, unholy, unworthy, unwanted, unqualified, unfit, unfavorable, undeserving, undignified, unsuitable, or unneeded we matter more to God than anybody else and as much as anybody else because God shows no partiality and God is working through the Holy Spirit to build a wholistic community in a world where everything seems partial.



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Our God may not be partial, but the gods of capitalism most certainly are. We're living with the greatest economic inequality in American history. According to Oxfam, the richest 1% now have more wealth than the rest of the world combined. The top three richest people in America have more wealth than the bottom 50% of the country. Since the global pandemic, the top 1% have accumulated 63% of all new wealth. That's what 40 years of tax breaks for the wealthy does. Even just a 5% tax on billionaires could raise enough to lift 2 billion people out of poverty. What does it mean to speak of an impartial God in a world of partiality? What does it mean to proclaim that "God shows no partiality" in a world where all evidence points to the contrary? I think it's an invitation for transgression—an invitation to follow the Spirit of transgression and become transgressors ourselves, transgressors for the sake of beloved community.

Peter had been taught all his life Gentiles were unclean and unholy. He was taught never to associate with Gentiles, never to talk to Gentiles, never to enter the home of a Gentile, and never under any circumstances whatsoever, to eat with a Gentile. Peter was also taught some Gentiles were worse than others. There were Samaritans, Canaanites, Syrophoenicians, Barbarians, Scythians, Syrians, Greeks, and many other Gentiles, but the worst Gentiles of all were the Roman occupiers who oppressed his people. And the worst of Romans all were soldiers. On top of that, Peter had just seen Roman soldiers torture, mock, and crucify his teacher. And now he was being called by the Spirit to go against everything he'd ever been taught in life to transgress every line he'd ever drawn between Jew and Gentile, clean and unclean, holy and unholy, sacred and profane to follow where God was calling him.

The reason we should all love Peter is that he was slow on the uptake. He's a very relatable disciple. He was impatient, rash, fool hearty, and almost drowned that one time. He had his name changed to "The Rock," only to have Jesus rebuke him in the next breath saying, "Get Behind me Satan!" And Peter always had to hear things three times before he got it. It was only after the cock crowed three times, that Peter realized he had denied Jesus. Jesus asked him three times, "Simon, do you love me?" before Peter realized what was going on. And in our story, God had to lower that heavenly picnic blanket filled with all the animals' Jewish people were not to associate with, let alone eat three times before Peter could understand that "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."



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Some of you are thinking, “What a knuckle head? Why did it take him three time to get it?” What about us? How many times has this scripture been read in the last 2000 years and we still don’t get it. And even when we think we get it, we haven’t figured out how to live it. We’re still partial about race, class, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, nationality, geography, and religion. These differences still have the power to separate and segregate, to put up walls and boundaries, to determine who’s right or wrong, in or out, up or down, rich or poor, rejoicing or suffering rejoices, who lives or who dies. That’s why every time I see people transgress boundaries for the sake of love, I see the Spirit working. And the reason why so many people are struggling to overcome partiality by transgressing these boundaries is to create a world where everyone has access to the love, care, and resources we all need to survive because there is no such thing as a partial community.

You can be a partial a cult, but you can’t be a community. You can be a partial clan, but you can’t be a community. You can be a partial club, but you can’t be a community. You can be a partial clique, but you can’t be a community. You can be a partial circle, set, sorority, or societyⁱ, but you can’t be a community. You can be partial and call yourself a church, but you still can’t be a Christian community, because Christian community is by nature impartial and inclusiveⁱⁱ just like our founder and our God. Christian community lives in the Spirit who proclaimed, “I am not partial.” And why would we want to be partial anyway? When we’re partial, we only have part of the story, part of the gifts, part of the beautiful diversity of God’s creation. When we’re partial, we only lead partial lives. What if instead of being partial Christians in a partial community, we were whole Christians in a wholistic community?

The radical implication of this story is that God desires for all the false boundaries to be transgressed for the sake of building beloved community. We may imagine there are some things that cannot be transgressed by the Spirit, some boundaries that are eternal, some differences that will stand the test of time, some lines that cannot be crossed, some laws that will stand forever. But the story of Cornelius and Peter testifies against that. It proclaims that there is nothing that cannot be transgressed for the sake of the beloved community. There is nothing that can stand in the way of people feeling welcomed, accepted, included, and belonging in the holy family. There is nothing—not even God’s people, God’s ministers, God’s laws, or God’s word. God’s people, ministers, laws, and even God’s word can and must be transgressed when they become barriers to beloved community.



I know this might sound confusing. It confused the disciples when Jesus, “You have heard it said, but I say...”. It confused the crowd when a bunch of Galileans started speaking in tongues. It confused the Ethiopian eunuch when he was reading Isaiah on the road to Gaza. It confused the elders in Jerusalem when Paul said, “God has sent me to the Gentiles.” It confused the Galatians and Corinthians when Paul said, “You know the old law, now here’s the new law.” It confused Peter on the roof of a house in Joppa. And it still confuses many Christians today. People simply have not learned that our God is a transgressor! Our God is a transgressor and that means there is no boarder or boundary God won’t cross to bring us into belonging. God even will go up against God own word for our sake. God will go up against God for our salvation. God will go against God for our humanity. God will go against God’s word if it has become an impediment to life, love, and liberation. God will go against God’s people if God must, to build beloved community.

Our God is a transgressor, and if we are people who seek the kingdom of God and desire to build that beloved community, then we should be partnering with God in the work of transgression. How does an American centurion become a Christian pastor? The same way Cornelius did. God transgressed every boundary between us. Every wall I erected God smashed. Every line I put up God crossed. God came to find me; God called me by name and then God changed it. And then after God sent people, like Peter, across the boundaries to come find me and bring me into the bonds of beloved community. And if God will do that for a Roman centurion like Cornelius, and an American centurion like me, then God will do it for anyone.

It doesn’t matter what your race, class, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, nationality, geography, or religion is—God knows your name and is calling you. It doesn’t matter if you are so far outside the church you can’t even see the door from where you are, God hears your prayers, God sees your generosity. Like Cornelius God knows you by name and is willing to transgress any law, any line, any limit, any wall, any border, or any boundary to embrace you and to help you find your place. And God is looking for people like Peter, who are brave enough and bold enough to transgress their own theology, to transgress their own traditions, to transgress their own religion, to transgress their own ethnicity, to transgress their own race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, to transgress their own ideology, to help God in the hard and holy work of sacred transgression. Praise be to our God the great transgressor! And blessed be those who transgress the world for God’s sake, for they shall see the beloved community.ⁱⁱⁱ



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ⁱ See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (roughly translated as *Community and Society*), 1935 who distinguished between *gemeinschaft* or community and *gesellschaft* or association/society.

ⁱⁱ See M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, 1987, where he developed four different stages of community:

(i) Pseudo Community is the front porch of Community in Peck's model. It is dominated by convention, orderliness, superficial communication, and a search for similarities. In this stage, interactions are typically very polite — exchanging business cards and avoiding difficult issues. Trust is shallow. However, it is shallow not because members are untrustworthy but because they are untested. The circumstances are uncertain and nothing much has happened to the group to reveal how members will behave under pressure. Rather than step into this uncertainty, members mostly keep to safe ground — and “talk about the weather.”

In the diagram above, members want to belong. However, the lack of trust makes belonging a shaky proposition.

(ii) Chaos If Pseudo Community is the front porch of Community, Chaos is the back yard. It is characterized by efforts to manage the differences that begin to surface in the group, a lack of effective listening among members, the formation of cliques, efforts to solve each other's problems, unrealistic expectations, and judgments both of oneself and others. In the diagram above, members grown weary of avoiding uncomfortable undercurrents and begin to speak out. This is a sort of realism. But is confrontational lacking the trust that is needed for members to speak very personally.

(iii) Emptiness is the bridge to Community. It is characterized by a letting go of the barriers which have been keeping members from being fully present and which have therefore been getting in the way of honest and meaningful communication. Such barriers may include expectations about Community Building or the Facilitators, resentments about something that was said or done in the group, the need to fix individuals or control the process, hanging on to old stereotypes, making snap judgments, wounds and rejections received in past relationships, etc.

(iv) Community is characterized by the acknowledgment of and respect for individual differences; a depth of listening; an unusual level of group safety; the possibility of emotional and spiritual healing; shared leadership; softened (respectful) conflict; effective group decision making; a sense of belonging; a greater awareness of what stage the group is in and what is needed to move it forward.

ⁱⁱⁱ One definition of a community is a group of people who care about each other, feel they belong together, share things in common with one another, and have a common purpose or mission.