No Partiality

A pastor friend of mine
  A woman from India
  A convert from Hinduism

Called me a while back to inform me
  That after six years as pastor of a Brethren congregation
  The church was letting her go.

There was no explanation behind their action . . .
  Just a three months’ notice.

She wasn’t surprised.

In fact, the only thing that surprised her
  Was that it had taken so long.

She had felt from the very beginning
  That due to the color of her skin
  Due to her being an immigrant
  Due to her being a woman

She was never accepted.

Whether this is an accurate perception of the situation
  I don’t know.

But what I do know is that it pains me to no end
  That anyone would ever get the feeling . . .
  That a congregation discriminated against them
  Due to the color of their skin, ethnicity, or gender.

Does it surprise you that you can find racism
  In the Church of the Brethren?
No Partiality

In this month’s newsletter
I quote experiences from another member
Of the Church of the Brethren
Who is also a person of color.

Her name is Melissa Grandison from the McPherson CoB.

She shared her experiences
In the January/February 2015 Messenger.

• During National Youth Conference, I was called “nigger.”
• At a church camp I was singled out for “ruining” photos because the combination of the sun and camera flash distorted my face
• Prior to boarding flights to On Earth Peace board meeting I have been pulled aside in security lines and had my hair probed for weapons
• While studying at a Church of the Brethren college, I was pulled over, asked to step out of my vehicle, and questioned by police 12 times during my first semester. I was never issued a warning or a ticket.
• At Annual Conference Brethren often share family histories and ask, “Who are you related to?” But I am asked instead, “How did you find the church?” They assume that because I am a person of color, it is unlikely that I could share their Church of the Brethren heritage.

I believe one of the most important tasks
Of the United States’ church is racial reconciliation.

It has to be foremost in every congregation’s mission.

Because if there is anything clearer in the New Testament
It is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ
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Breaks through all barriers
Of race, gender, ethnicity, and culture.

~~

Last week
We looked at the Great Commission.

The call to go out and make disciples of all nations.

The gospel is a message for all people.

There is much work before us.

~~

Our lesson today speaks specifically to this.

Our reading comes from the Book of Acts.

Luke wrote the Book of Acts
As an account of the history of the early church.

It records the spread of the gospel
Beginning in Jerusalem
And spreading to the far reaches of the world.

Acts, not only describes the spread of the gospel
Geographically, from Jerusalem to Rome.
Acts also describes the spread of the gospel demographically

From Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian from Africa
To today’s story of Cornelius, a man from Italy.

~~

Our story takes place over a four-day period
In two locations, Joppa and Caesarea.

Joppa was a Jewish city.
Caesarea was a Roman city.

Both cities were located on the coast of the Mediterranean.

The story’s two main characters are
   Peter, a Jew, and Cornelius, an Italian.

Peter was staying in Joppa.
   Cornelius in Caesarea.

~

Cornelius was a good man!

God-fearing, the scripture says.

He and his family were devout.

He gave generously to the needs around him.

But he wasn’t a Jew, he was Italian.

And, well . . . you know those Italians!

Cornelius has a vision.

In the vision, an angel tells Cornelius
   To send for Simon Peter in Joppa.

Cornelius sends three men to Joppa.

Then Peter has a vision.

A sheet descends from heaven filled with food.
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Food considered unclean God now proclaims clean

They spend the night with Peter.

And the following morning they set off for Caesarea.

Peter takes several disciples with him.

They arrive at the home of Cornelius'.

Cornelius, gathers his family in the living room.

And they sit before Peter eager for what he will say.

And Peter tells them the story of Jesus!

The Holy Spirit fills the room
   Italians and Jews alike lit by the fire of the Spirit.

Peter’s disciples were astonished
   That the Gift of the Holy Spirit
      Had been poured out “even on the Gentiles!”

To Peter, it is clear the vision has a double meaning.

God lifted the dietary restrictions
   Found in the Levitical Codes of Holiness.

Christians can now celebrate with pulled pork BBQs.

And God has established that faith in Jesus
   Goes beyond the walls of Jerusalem
      Beyond the walls of the Jewish synagogue.
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To every nation
   Every tribe
      Every culture, race, and ethnicity!
~~

The story has several equally important lessons.

It is a story showing the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit initiated this encounter
   Between Peter and Cornelius
      For the sake of the Gospel.

We never know but that God prepares us
   For just such a thing.

Maybe God has placed a person before you
   For the expressed purpose of sharing your faith.

The Holy Spirit prearranged
   The encounter between Peter and Cornelius.

It is also a story about two conversion experiences.

The first, of course,
   Is the conversions of Cornelius and his family.

But it is also a story on the conversion of Peter!

Yea, I know . . . Peter was already a disciple.
   Already believed in Jesus.

But nevertheless, Peter had a conversion experience.

Peter, for the first time, understood clearly
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The gospel message was not just
For the people of Israel.

They were to proclaim Jesus to all people groups!

Peter’s conversion was the understanding
That the message of Jesus was all-inclusive!

Everyone . . . no matter
   The color of their skin
   Their gender
   Their ethnicity
   Their language
   Or their social status

. . . all people were loved by God
   And invited into a relationship with Jesus.

And so, going let’s go back to my friend
   The woman, Indian, pastor,
   And her feelings of discrimination.

No one is to be spurned, shunned, rejected, or despised
   Based on their ethnic origin, race, color
   Culture, physical traits, or sexual orientation!

We cannot, must not, stand at the door
   And pick and choose who’s in and who’s out!

We are to welcome and embrace all peoples!

There much work to do
   In the area of racial reconciliation.
We can make a statement condemning racism  
And post it on our website.

We can “like” or “comment”  
On social media posts that support our position.

In other words,  
We can give lip service to the cause.

Important stuff for sure.

The Church of the Brethren’s has made multiple statements  
Seeking racial reconciliation.

Is there still racism within the denomination?  
~~
Here’s a story from Ed Gilbreath

He is the author of Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity.

He tells the story of a white evangelical church leader  
Guilt-ridden over his own racist views  
Who came to Ed desiring forgiveness.

He writes:

"How can I get over this?" the leader asked me, sobbing.  
"How can we be friends?"

I was silent for a moment, then asked him, "Do you like football?" He seemed a little puzzled, but said yes. "I do, too," I told him. "I used to
coach high school and college ball, and I have a lot of friends who play pro. I love a good game, and I love to cook out.

So here's what we do: I need to get to know you, and you need to get to know me. Why don't you come over to my house?" I was the only black in my suburban neighborhood at the time. I said: "Bring your wife and meet my wife, and we'll just sit and talk and get to know each other. I'll barbecue some steaks, and let's start there."

He was taken aback. He said, "You want me to come to your house?" "Yes," I said. "If you want me to sit here and clear your conscience for all the crap you did, I can't do that. Friendship is not cheap. It takes time and commitment."

I gave him my home phone number and told him to give me a call. I never heard from him again.

My challenge for us today
   Based on the message from today’s Scripture Lesson
   Is this:

   Support the work of developing a relationship
      With an African/American congregation.

   Pray that we might find a congregation
      Willing to journey together with us
         In a process of reconciliation.

   This is not going to be, initially, a heavy-duty enterprise.

   We want to come together and like the illustration
      Get to know each other
         And do some fun things together.

   If the opportunity arises, please, get involved in this.
Secondly, let each of us be intentional
In creating relationships and friendships
With people of color.

And not just those within our congregation!

Go out of your way
Find someone in your neighborhood
And simply reach out to them.

Intentionally, become a friend to them.

We may just discover the Holy Spirit
Has been working all along
Creating just such an encounter

And maybe, just maybe . . .
We will have taken one more step
In building the kingdom of God.