

## 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

## No Partiality

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.

## No Partiality

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.

## No Partiality

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.

## No Partiality

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

## No Partiality

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.

## No Partiality

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*

## No Partiality

*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.

## No Partiality

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.