

“PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES”

John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18

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When I was a child, my school celebrated May Day. We would make up little baskets of flowers and distribute them to friends. Lunch was a picnic on the lawn. After the picnic, we danced the Maypole dance practiced in gym class for weeks. The tetherball pole was pressed into service, now with a dozen pastel ribbons reaching from the top pinned to the ground at regular intervals around the perimeter of the circle. Twenty-four dancers_twelve pairs of two_would step into the circle, pick up their ribbons, and go. The steps of the dance moved from the outer boundaries of the circle to the very center and back again. You had to remember when to hold your ribbon high, and when to hold it low; and if you all did the dance just right, at the end, the maypole was decorated with this lovely woven pattern of ribbons stretching from top to bottom. I've been thinking about those maypoles all week.

Peter was in Jerusalem conferring with the other Apostles. The topic under discussion was whether gentile Christians could join the church without first undergoing the rigorous instruction of Jewish proselytes. This was a multiple year process of intense study, capped, if you were male, with circumcision before you were truly a Jew. There were good arguments for keeping Christianity a purely Jewish movement. How could one understand Jesus and his message outside the context of Judaism? These gentile converts knew nothing of Abraham, or David, or the prophets, nothing of the great spiritual and intellectual tradition of Jesus. And if they were not forced to learn, as a condition of their acceptance into the faith, then things in the church might change radically in both theology and practice. Peter had already instigated a major change in baptizing Cornelius and his household and then sharing a meal with the whole gentile lot of them. Was this change the movement of the Holy Spirit or was it the first step towards ruin of the faith and traditions Jesus had given into the apostles' hands?

Peter's defense of his actions is simple. It is God and the Holy Spirit that are in charge of the church, he argued. Not us. The spirit was present in Peter's vision and in the house of Cornelius. "If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Who indeed? Luke tells us that in the face of Peter's testimony, all were silenced.

So maybe right now you're thinking, "OK, Liz, this is all fine, but where does the maypole come in?" Paul and Luke spend considerable time in their writings apprising us of the circumcision controversy, partly maybe because they were concerned that there be a record of this first issue that the infant church resolved. But I don't think that's their main intent. Their intent is guidance, a helpful word to Christians not about how this issue was settled by the faithful, but about how issues in the future might be addressed. Think about it. The easiest course of action in those days, and a course of action that probably would have been entirely acceptable to both Jews and gentiles, schooled as they were in multiple sectarian division of religious groups_the logical course of action would have been to form two Christian sects: Jewish Christians and gentile Christians, each to go its own way, create its distinctive church. That's what logically should have happened that day in Jerusalem. But the apostles, a monolithic pole of orthodoxy if you'd

ever want to see one, these wise and courageous apostles chose instead to look at what seemed to be Christian activity way out on the fringes of the faith, and to invite those on the perimeter to join them in a dance. And the course of the church was set. In and out and in and out, from the center to the outermost edges, from century to century, the dancers weave and bow. And the towering central core of the faith becomes ever more richly decorated, beautiful with God's own beauty. So it was at the time of Peter and the apostles. And so it is today. Christianity is at its best, the church is most alive and most beautiful when the orthodoxy of the center—the keepers of the way things are and the way things have been—choose to dance with those of the faith less conventional, those with new ideas or new expressions of old ideas. And the conversation goes back and forth and back and forth—vital, energetic, fully alive.

What is gained from the dance? For those who stand close to the center of faith, those who would consider themselves the orthodox of the tradition, two things are gained by claiming relationship with those on the outer fringes. First, faith that is not in conversation, faith that exists unchallenged, is a faith that quickly ossifies, hardens, becomes even idolatrous. There is energy in conversation, rigorous exploration, and examination of shade and nuance. That which has been handed down can be encountered anew and so enlivened. Faith unexamined, by contrast, is faith that can all too easily come to believe it is the word of God rather than informed by the Word of God, which is one definition of blasphemy. But the second reason orthodoxy should talk to the fringe is that more often than not, that's how the center of the church grows and changes to meet the challenges of a new day. I think of the slavery issue of the 19th century. Christian abolitionism started out as a lunatic idea of a few rabid Quakers. By the end of the 19th century almost every major church body condemned the concept of chattel slavery as contrary to God's will and Christian life, despite slavery appearing in the scripture. I think in our age of what the UCC titles "Integrity of Creation," the Christian imperative to care for the earth. From a movement that began way out on the fringes, in the last ten years, liberal protestants, catholics, conservative evangelicals, and now the orthodox church find themselves united in reframing an environmental ethic that goes beyond "fill the earth and subdue it." The fringe keeps the church pushing its boundaries, new, renewed, able to speak to successive generations and the issues of their faith.

So that's why the center should always dance with its perimeter. Why should those at the far reaches have any truck with the often oppressive orthodoxy of the center. I go back to Peter and the apostles and the circumcision controversy. Where would Christianity be—would it even be—if the decision that day had been to split: Jewish Christians here, Gentile Christians over there? There is power and wisdom and richness in tradition. I try to imagine our faith unhinged completely from the Hebrew Bible—from Sarah and Amos, from David and Jeremiah, and the Ten Commandments, and the stories of Noah's Ark and the Exodus. What we would have lost? It's unthinkable.

The church today is so fractured—and when I speak of the church, I mean the church Universal, Church with a capital "C." Fractured, fragmented, polarized, with each group—ours included—more often than not clinging to its own orthodoxy and refusing to talk, much less dance with those they see as fringe. It's easier to talk only with those who agree with you. It's more comfortable to live an unchallenged faith. But then you miss the rainbow colors of the maypole and the energy and joy of the dance.

We, in the United Church of Christ, we pride ourselves on being a uniting church, on being willing to struggle to hold in one circle as many voices and points of view as possible. So we say, but we could do better. When was the last time you truly challenged yourself to hear, to listen openly, to learn from Christians who are at the fringes of your theology? Well, it's about time you did. It's about time I did. Peter and the apostles chose to merge the Jewish and Gentile church. They knew it would bring change and it did. They knew it would bring conflict and it did. But they believed fervently that it is not us but, instead, God and the Holy Spirit who are in charge of the church. So they plucked up their courage, and began the dance. And trusted the God of their Risen Christ to make it right. How can we do less? Thanks be to God. Amen.