

**“God Plays No Favorites”****Acts 10:34-48****Andrew Foster Connors****Baptism of the Lord****January 12, 2020**

Chestertown, MD, November 24, 1931, “Special Dispatch to the Baltimore Sun: A mob of 500 persons, among whom were some of the most prominent residents of Kent, Queen Anne’s, and Cecil Counties, stormed the Kent County jail here tonight in an attempt to wreak vengeance upon George Davis, a 28 year-old Negro, arrested today in Wilmington for an alleged attempt to attack Mrs. Elizabeth Lusby, who lives in the vicinity of Kennedysville, early Saturday morning. Stephen R. Collins, State’s Attorney of Kent County, mounted the steps of the Courthouse, and appealed to the mob that thronged the Courthouse yard, to allow the law to take its course, and promised that every effort would be made to bring the Negro to a speedy trial. Officials refused to say where Davis was being held.”

Just a week or so later, Matthew Williams was dragged into the public square in Salisbury, MD, where he was lynched and burned under electric lights by a citizenry claiming that “there is no race feeling here, the feeling is against the Sunpapers and outside interference.”<sup>1</sup> The Chicago Tribune, reporting on the matter, said otherwise. “A lighted Christmas tree stands on the Courthouse lawn near the oak from which Williams dangled on December 4,” the paper said, “but there is more hate than goodwill prevalent in the community.” Such was the culture of Maryland our Maryland when Brown Memorial Church installed the window here behind me earlier in April of that same year. I’ve never thought of stained glass windows as particular prophetic, but the good people of Brown must have thought otherwise.

On the cover of your bulletin are several closeup photos that I took this week. Let me read to you from the dedication brochure on April 26, 1931. “The large group of figures in the foreground illustrates types of Humanity and exemplifies the Love of God for all Mankind through Jesus Christ. Beginning with the left hand lancet this group of figures represents a king, a figure representing the yellow race, a lame man, the Apostle St. John, the Prophet Moses, a widow and her child, an orphan, a figure representing the brown race, St. Stephen the Martyr, St. Augustine one of the Latin Fathers, a blind man, a figure representing the black race, and a crusader.” Of course this is not the way we would speak of people of various races or people with disabilities today and I would hope it’s not the kind of detail we would install in any window. At its worst, it

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<sup>1</sup> “Finds Mob Spirit Rules Easter Shore; Lynching May Embarass Ritchie,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 27, 1931.

bespeaks of a kind of tokenism, 3 non-white characters amidst other figures, presumably white figures including Jesus himself. If we had the money, I'd love to copy the skin color of one of one of the people of color and apply it to the faces of Jesus and Moses and Augustine who was after all, an African bishop for a more historically accurate rendering, decentering whiteness in the process. And yet, even with these problems, the specificity of these figures in terms of race, disability, and class must have been as important to the congregation in 1931 as it is today. When we say that Christ brings all people together in community - we mean *all* people including the people that are being lynched in the public square. It's a concreteness that guards against the "everybody's welcome" reflexive mantra that is easy for any community to throw around as long as it means everybody like us.

That specificity is rooted firmly in some of the earliest theological convictions expressed in the church's early history and vision - that when it comes to the Christian community, God shows no partiality. There are not some who are "better Christians" and others who are "lesser Christians," not in terms of our relationship to Christ. The Spirit blows where it will. The Spirit calls who it will. The Spirit saves who it will.

Such a conviction was as difficult for the early church to accept then as it is today. The church started among all Jewish followers. Most of the earliest Christians assumed that to be part of the church, you had to be Jewish. If you weren't Jewish, you had to become Jewish first. Even Jesus himself had once proclaimed that he was sent only to the house of Israel. And then the Spirit started testing the church's tolerance for having its boundaries broken. An Ethiopian eunuch wanted to be baptized. Saul, the great persecutor of the church, was converted by Jesus himself on the road to Damascus. And now Cornelius, a Gentile and a soldier - who saw a vision and wanted to know Jesus for himself. It would take the church a long time to sort through this Gentile question. In many ways, it would consume the church's energy for the first hundred years of its existence. Much of the New Testament is testimony to that struggle.

The struggle is the important thing since it's likely that the Spirit will always be challenging the church to a greater inclusion. That's the message I get from the book of Acts. The Spirit descends at Pentecost and suddenly Jewish people from different nations and cultures can begin to hear each other in their own languages. The Spirit pushes Peter to catch up to the Ethiopian eunuch and suddenly the outsider becomes the insider. The Spirit knocks Saul off his horse and suddenly the church gets knocked off its own high horse of thinking it gets to decide who is worthy to receive God's grace and who gets to be judge over the other. The Spirit will challenge all the major distinctions of biblical times - male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, sinner and the so-called righteous.

And the Spirit doesn't stop there. All through the church's history the Spirit challenges our partiality toward particular cultures or particular races, partiality that we know are products of our own prejudices. The Spirit challenges our allegiance to political parties, football teams and nationhood itself when those allegiances become more defining for us than God's saving grace. The Spirit challenges sexual norms created to preserve patriarchy itself. The Spirit is always in the disruption business and the church is called to catch up to what God is doing in our midst. And when we do that, we become witnesses to God's activity and the church itself testified to the radical leveling power of God's grace where all the major divisions that we create fall before us and we see ourselves as God created us - children of God - no one better than another in terms of our inherent value.

That is the significance saying that Jesus is Lord. It's not a battering ram to be used against those who are not Christian. It's not a "we're better than you" slogan to be shouted as if we are football fans in a stadium wagging our we're number one foam fingers in the face of an enemy we're trying to destroy. It is the core conviction that we have one judge who is over us - Jesus the Jew; Jesus the crucified one. And that one judge is the person who offers us forgiveness which is the thing that is needed if we want to have a full relationship with God.

And I'm not so sure even those of us who hang rainbow flags over our doorposts are ready for the implications of that teaching - not in this time when politics seems to have claimed more of our allegiance than our faith in God. Because if Jesus is Lord means that anyone the Spirit has called is a sibling of mine, the church fails when we don't find ways to reach each other across our various divisions. Not only have we failed to reach each other, but many of us have decided it's not even worth trying. It's enough to condemn this kind of Christian or that kind of Christian on facebook so I don't have to challenge them face to face in the public square. I'm as guilty as anyone. Yet Peter's story and our own history seems to show that the narratives that we create about each other - about people of a particular politics, or people of a particular race, or people of a particular nationality, or gender expression, or disability, or class, or educational background - these stories are so often barriers to us actually engaging each other. The stories become kinds of lies that we tell ourselves to convince us that our judgment against others we don't even know and haven't bothered to get to know is correct.

And that may be the biggest lesson of all of the Cornelius story. Be careful when you decide that a particular kind of person is beyond the pale and not worthy of relationship. Those are exactly the kinds of people that the Spirit is likely to shake up and you with it. Forgiveness, after all, is God's way of saying, I'm not through with you yet. And if God doesn't give up on particular people, who are we to think that we can?

We are at a time in our history where that kind of conviction is offensive to people on the right and the left, but it also might be what's needed. We'll never be able to address the injustices of poverty, the horrors of war, the systemic inequalities created by racism without some kind of cooperation with people we don't like. We will always slip back toward the failure of war which is always taken for righteous causes yet almost always leaves us with deeper wounds than the ones that led us to conflict in the first place. More locally, our city won't get a functioning politics, a more humane police department, or safer streets without connection across divisions that we treat as uncrossable. And even in this congregation, our ability to function and thrive will always be proportional to the depth of relationship that we have created and sustained with each other.

"We Americans are locked in political combat and focused on President Trump," writes Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn in Thursday's New York Times, "but there is a larger cancer gnawing at the nation that predates Trump and is larger than him. Suicides are at their highest rate since WWII; one child in seven is living with a parent suffering from substance abuse; a baby is born every 15 minutes after prenatal exposure to opioids. . .we have deep structural problems that have been a half century in the making, under both political parties, that are often transmitted from generation to generation."<sup>2</sup>

This is where the church has been sent with a baptism that says we know God because of what we see in Jesus - the healer, the forgiver, the one who comes to be in solidarity with the suffering and calls people across their human-made boundaries to extend the same grace and forgiveness, striving for the same justice, that he extended to us.

Peter let the Spirit lead him - across a boundary he was taught never to cross. A boundary that was reasonable, historical, and safe for everyone involved. And yet he crossed it to find out that on the other side of that boundary was just another redeemed sinner, another human being in need of God's grace. Peter crossed that boundary against wisdom and counsel of the church itself. I wonder if we are willing to do the same.

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<sup>2</sup> "Who Killed the Knapp Family?" Nicholas Kristof & Sheryl WuDunn, *The New York Times*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/opinion/sunday/deaths-despair-poverty.html>