

Who's Your Daddy?
(Acts 11:1-18 and John 13:31-35)

Once upon a time in small town in Tennessee a baby boy was born to an unwed mother. His name was Ben. To the people in that small town Ben was different because he didn't have a father. Most of the town treated him as though he was an outsider and many teased him. Wherever he went, Ben was always asked the same question, "Hey boy, who's your daddy?" At school, on the play ground, in the grocery store, at the soda fountain people would ask the same embarrassing question, "Hey boy, who's your daddy?"

After many years of this treatment Ben began to feel like he was outside looking in. As a human being, he was unacceptable by the standards of society – at least according to the self-imposed standards of this small town.

When Ben was 12 years old, a new preacher came to town. As he greeted his congregation after his first service, the new preacher, who didn't know Ben, put his hand on his shoulder and politely asked him, "Son, Who's your daddy?" An uncomfortable quietness fell over the whole church. To Ben, it seemed that all eyes and ears were fixed on him. Everyone was listening for Ben's response to that embarrassing question.

But the new preacher sensed the tension in the air and called upon the Holy Spirit. After a pregnant pause, the pastor spoke in a voice loud enough for most to hear. He said, "Wait a minute! I know who you are. Yes, I see the

family resemblance. Why you are a child of God. You've got a great inheritance, son. Go and claim it." For the first time in a long time, Ben smiled, lifted his head high and walked proudly through the door. The pastor's words had changed him forever.

Many years later, Ben recalled, "I was never the same again. Whenever anyone asked, 'Who's your Daddy?' I would smile and say, 'I'm a child of God'." That preacher helped me understand that in God's kingdom there are no outsiders." Please pray with me.

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be abundantly pleasing to you, the One who has created us to be your children – children of God. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word proclaimed here this morning. Help us to see all people as your children – insiders in the kingdom where there should be no outsiders. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

The story about Ben is an urban legend – a mixture of fact and fiction – handed down in our modern day oral tradition. For the purpose of this morning's message, consider it to be a parable with a factual moral. Discovering that he was a child of God was a time of change for young Ben. According to my version of the parable,

you will recall, Ben said he was changed forever.

On that day many years ago he understood that he was not an outsider. Changed by this revelation, he went on to accomplish great things in life. Ben Hooper became the ultimate insider when he was elected governor of the State of Tennessee in 1911.¹ That's the factual part of this urban legend.

The time after Jesus' resurrection was also a time of change for the disciples. They were still learning about God's plan. Like young Ben, they were outsiders in a society that had just rejected Jesus, their leader. As God's plan unfolded after the resurrection something happened they didn't count on. They discovered that Gentiles – the other outsiders of their day – were to be incorporated into God's plan for the salvation of the world.

The New Testament reading from Acts we heard this morning is Luke's account of Peter's vision – a revelation. In that vision God revealed to Peter that "... God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." It was for this reason that God called Peter to go preach to Cornelius, a Roman centurion and his household. We can read about Cornelius in the previous chapter 10 of Acts. In chapter 11, Peter uses the vision to explain why he not only preached to Cornelius and his household, but also ate with them as well. In the end the apostles praised God because even Gentiles were given the opportunity to repent and be part of the community of faith – to be accepted for what they really were – children of God.

But Peter had his critics. Hebrew converts – the circumcised Christians – questioned Peter's judgment in going to

Cornelius. "Why did you go to the uncircumcised?" they asked. Like Ben Hooper, Cornelius and his household were social outcasts – living outside the limits of Hebrew society and its laws. They were Gentiles, the uncircumcised, judged by Hebrew law to be unclean. As a Roman centurion, Cornelius was also an enemy of the Hebrew converts and the Apostles.

Because Peter was raised in the ancient traditions of the Law of Moses, he understood his critics. In the midst of his vision, Peter even rejected God's call to "get up, kill, and eat" animals that were considered by that law to be unclean. His first response to the voice in his vision was to hold on to the tradition – to resist being changed by God.

God set up a conflict within Peter's conscience forcing him to deal with the prospect of entering into a new situation by embracing change – or holding on to the traditions of his past life. And so today, God challenges us by setting up similar conflict as we are called to make choices about insiders and outsiders. Like gay versus straight, fundamental right versus liberal left, pro-choice versus pro-life, offering hospitality to illegal immigrants versus deporting them. The challenges are without limit.

Peter's experience is an encounter with God that changes him forever. It changes his way of thinking about God. Peter is transformed as he recognizes for the first time that it's not about circumcised versus uncircumcised. It's not about clean or unclean. It's not about insiders and outsiders. It's not even about Jews and Gentiles. It's really about knocking down barriers. The barriers I am speaking of are the human barriers and limits that we

¹ <http://www.snopes.com/glurge/hooper.asp>

ourselves construct to keep others out – for whatever reason.

Through his vision, Peter realized that barriers need to be broken down. Breaking down barriers and stretching and extending the limits to include all God's children – even the uncircumcised – the Gentiles. We seem to have difficulty living according to the simplest law that would effectively govern all human behavior. It's recorded in our gospel reading this morning.

So now I am giving you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love each other. [John 13:34 *NLT*]

It can't be stated in more simple or concise terms: "Love one another as I have loved you." These eight words have the potential to tear down all the barriers of exclusivity that have been erected in the many years since the birth of Christ's holy church at Pentecost. Unfortunately, that very same church has been one of the more formidable builders of barriers – both in modern times as well as in the past. We know of many examples, but here is one that has always defied my understanding of Christian hospitality – the idea that as children of God we are all insiders in the kingdom with no outsiders.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990. The ADA had a significant affect on commercial and institutional owners compelling them to implement changes that would make their buildings fully accessible to people with disabilities. The immediate affect was expensive as building owners had to install ramps, elevators and take other steps to remove barriers to people

with disabilities just like we have done here in this church.

As is the case with all wide ranging federal legislation, certain special interest groups pled hardship and requested exemption or dispensation from the new laws. It is ironic to note that one of the first entities to ask for an exemption from the ADA was the institutional church.

Now, twenty years later there are still churches that are not fully accessible to all persons. The very institution that should have led the way in providing access for disabled persons – the church – asked to be excused from its social responsibility. For this reason, in some churches, those who must live with physical disabilities remain as outsiders in the kingdom that is supposed to have no outsiders. This is ironic if not inconsistent with the gospel message.

Who else in church and society do we tend to treat as outsiders these days? In the aftermath of 9/11 non-Christians are probably the largest group of outsiders, particularly Muslims, and people of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent in general. I know some of you are weary of hearing about the gay constituency, but they also represent a sizable group that remains on the outside.

Other outsiders include people with A.I.D.S., the poor, those who can't afford adequate health care, some people of color, and more. In some situations we even treat our youth as outsiders. You can fill in the rest of the blanks.

Just as God challenged Peter to deal with the conflict between holding on to Hebrew tradition and reaching out to those outside the "circumcised" community, God challenges us. Are we

more in line with Peter as he was able to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in Cornelius and the other outsiders of his day? Or are we more like his critics that chose to hold fast to the past and exclude the “uncircumcised,” those who would ask young Ben Hooper, “Who’s your daddy?”

In many ways, Peter’s conflict continues in us today. And like Peter we are free to choose between the insiders and the outsiders. Where in your life do you sense this conflict? Do you know someone who is on the outside; someone who yearns to be on the inside?

Like Peter, we are called by God today to be compassionately objective, to make room for the movement of the Holy Spirit across the lines that separate us from those outside, to break down the barriers that we have constructed out of our own fears, our resistance to recognize that change is transformation and that transformation tears down the walls that isolate us from the reality that God’s kingdom is coming near on earth.

Where do you sense this conflict in your life? It’s there within each one of us in different ways. God is calling us to be aware of and sensitive to the things that divide us into insiders and outsiders. God is calling us to make right choices, to open our hearts, our minds, and our doors – you have heard this before. God is calling us to unity – to put an end to all that divides us. The response to God’s call is personal. It’s up to each one of us to let the Holy Spirit in and welcome all God’s children into our communion so that never again will anyone ask, “Who’s your daddy?”