

Scripture: Acts 10:34-48

Sermon Title: "Gentile Pentecost"

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As I was heading up to Bangor on Friday for the Pre-Annual Meeting Retreat for the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ, I was driving along with the radio on for some background noise and I heard a commercial. Now this particular advertisement was for a car dealer and about a great trade in deal that they are currently offering for a limited time only, you know the sort of ad right? And just when you are about to think, "this deal sounds so perfect - why would anybody in the market for a new car go anywhere else? And then you hear the fast talking at the end of the ad - all the fine print if you will about how this offer is limited by certain restrictions and criteria and how the offer in fact is not the greatest thing ever.

Whether on a TV or radio commercial or in a printed ad, with all those super tiny words at the bottom, we all have experienced fine print. And what happens when we face a world where so many things seem to come with exceptions - so many things come with fine print? It transforms us to always be skeptical when something seems too good to be true. When we hear of something that sounds really awesome, we have been conditioned by the fine print to always say, "Yeah, sounds good, but what's the catch?"

As the early church is forming, taking shape after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the church is growing. Our Bible Study meetings have been looking at this growth for some time now. As the Apostles, those first disciples, and other emerging leaders in the church are sharing the good news, people are being baptized and crowds of people are being added into the number of believers and followers of Jesus the Christ. But in the midst of all this wonderful growth, and the message of salvation, the message of Jesus and his love, the message of hope founded in Christ, this message has been offered with fine print - for Jews, not Gentiles. For Jews, not non-Jews. You see, the early Church after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus was growing in numbers

as Jews, like the first disciples, were beginning to follow Jesus. But this blessing and at times, blessed burden, of discipleship was not yet extended to the gentiles. For we see in our scripture reading for today, what could easily be referred to as the Gentile Pentecost. That moment when God, having empowered Peter to erase that fine print that was, whether intentionally or not, keeping the gentiles out of the church, now sent the Holy Spirit upon a crowd of people of non-Jewish decent and welcomed them into life transformed by Jesus. In this scripture reading, God erased the fine print, so that “all are welcome” would truly mean “all”. That the blessings of Jesus Christ were here for all to receive – not given for benefit of some but as a gift for each and every person.

And yet, as we can tell from Peter’s reaction to the crowd that is gathered and the criticism that he would initially receive for baptizing gentiles, the church from time to time, has not been so good at leaving the fine print out. The church back then, the church throughout history, and even the church today. For in many ways, throughout the life of the church, the fine print has reappeared. You are welcome here, unless...fill in the blank. I have witnessed faith communities that have said, “you are welcome here” with the fine print of “unless you look different than we do, dress different, have tattoos, or piercings, dye your hair funny colors, unless you live your life in a different way than us”. Others have said, “you are welcome here” with the fine print of “unless your understanding of God is different than mine or you don’t believe in the “right way”.” “You are welcome here, unless...” It may not always be spoken, but implied, felt by individuals who perceive that the welcome was not in fact extended to them. This has become a real problem in the life of the church universal. But what we see today in our scripture reading, is God saying to erase the fine print that seeks to exclude and throw the doors open and welcome all who will enter. This is good news for us all – a holy reminder that we are welcomed by God just as we are, no exceptions. This is good news for the world – that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And still, you see, the trouble with this, is that there has been too much fine print in our history as Christ's Church, talking about the church universal, and though we strive to erase it, and share God's welcome and live God's love without any exclusion, just like when we hear so much fine print or fast talking in advertisement, we have many in the world around the church saying, "sounds good, but what's the catch?" There are many people who have been hurt by the church, often by the fine print. And it has caused, in my opinion, much of an entire generation to look for the catch, to be skeptical of the welcome, because there must be fine print somewhere.

Now, our work is to help reverse the skepticism. Our work is to, as we strive to do in so many ways already, to live the unconditional welcome. At annual meeting, we heard from and learned from ministries on the margins, ministries that are reaching out to people who have been pushed to the side by society and, from time to time, pushed aside by the church. And this is holy work, to reverse the skepticism around the welcome of the church - the welcome of God.

Our work is to strive, with the ever present help of God, to reject any fine print in this welcome that God calls us to share with the world. And, if we come across any of those tiny words lurking about, any ways in which we see people be excluded from the love of God and from the blessing of Christian community, we have God's permission to erase them. For the message of God is for all, no exceptions - when Jesus offered the great commission to his disciples and said "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." that all is universal. And when we join the chorus that rings throughout the life of the United Church of Christ and say, "no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!", our call from God is to make sure that we live this welcome without the fine print. For the hope found in Jesus Christ is for all. No exceptions. May our life and our faith remind the world of God's universal welcome as we strive to live it out. Amen.