

"Blood is thicker than water." We know that's what they say. The family ties that bind us to one another are among the strongest forces in the world. It does not matter where you go; it is true in any culture.

Yet, it is also true that water can be thicker than blood, at least according to today's scripture lessons. When I say water it means baptism that brings us together in Jesus name; we are one family that loves each other and do things together as Jesus called us to do.

With the Pentecost two weeks away, today's Acts text reminds us what the church should be.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples who gathered to sing and pray in Jerusalem.

With the Spirit of God anointing on their heads, they became a family.

With the warm Spirit of God touching their hearts, they became different people; their thoughts and minds became changed.

They were called a church. They were just common people; nothing special and nothing different.

But their vision was different. They wanted to make a difference in the world. They wanted to live new lives, the lives that would fulfill Jesus' teaching of love.

To them, with their hearts full of the Spirit, they felt God was real; God was alive; the kingdom of God was closer than ever before.

So, they had to do something new; they wanted to reorganize their lives; and they were really happy to do it. The love of God was so real that they saw themselves and others differently; it was a totally different world. So people gave; they shared; they welcomed; they loved; they cared; they did what they could not even imagine doing. They really became a family—a church family.

Surely, we can say water can become thicker than blood.

That was what church in Jerusalem was like; it couldn't become any better. It was a perfect church! I would call it "perfect" because there was love, genuine love, among the members; what other word can I use?

But that early church had work to do: racism.

As a church, they were good to everyone in their own community; they gave what they owned to share; they would do anything for each other. But they couldn't go far enough to accept that the same love and grace of God would be available to those outside their fence.

Verse 45 of Acts 10 says, they were "astounded;" The NIV version says, they were "astonished;" The Amplified Bible says, they were "surprised and amazed."

Why? Even if they were all born-again Christians, they just didn't feel comfortable when they heard that those gentiles, those foreigners, non-Jewish people, could also have the same gifts from the Holy Spirit.

How could this be? We are all the right people; they are not.

We are all circumcised; they are not.

We have known the laws; they have not.

They don't even speak our language!

How can those foreigners get the same thing we have!

O God, we are confused! How could this be?

As I shared a little bit at our bible study meeting, the TLC channel had a program called "Guess Who's Coming Over." I think this was one of the best programs I watched on TV lately.

This is what happened in the episode: David is a self-described "redneck," about 50 years of age, in a rural area somewhere on the East Coast; David and his family are having a guest over; but they never thought this guest would be a black man, Chuck.

Chuck is from New York City and he was around white people; but David said he had never been around black people, never in his entire life; he had seen on TV, but not in person.

All of a sudden, a young black man shows up saying, "Hi, thanks for having me over, I am Chuck."

And David goes "What?" His face just turns red in shocking and doesn't know what to say. You can imagine...

But they spend a few days together talking, eating, and working in David's farm; to the viewers' surprise, they become friends.

A few days later, Chuck says, "Well, I have to go home now," and David just cries.

And Chuck invites David back to his home in New York; David gets to visit one of those ghetto areas in Harlem; and he finds out that the black people he meets there are the same human beings.

One funny thing is that David goes to a barbershop for his haircut and one of the guests there pays for his haircut; and he couldn't believe this and cries!

I just enjoyed the program. And when the program was over, I found many comments people put online.

Here is one of them I found to be very moving.

"Hi. I'm a white man. I watched the show. It made me cry. I cried like a schoolgirl. Why? For one thing, it was beautiful. It gave me hope that maybe one day fear, ignorance and hatred could REALLY be a thing of the past. We need more social experience like that to bring down the wall of prejudice that keeps us all from enjoying one another for what we really are: HUMANS."

<http://blackandmarriedwithkids.com/2009/05/01/tlcs-guess-whos-coming-over/>

As humans, we all have limits and prejudices because that's how we

are raised in any culture.

Because of that, church can be a hostile place; even though we say we love each other, church can be one of the most segregated places between races, cultures, and social classes.

But today's text in Acts shows that that is not what God wanted a church to be; God had already been with the gentiles even before Peter and his church members went to see them; God had already confirmed his love for these Romans and given them all the gifts of the Spirit they could possibly have.

All God wanted from these people was to become united in love.

God wanted them to work together to serve the people wherever they went.

To God, it does not matter where we are from; we are all God's loved ones.

Today's text gives an important lesson: we need to push ourselves a little bit more to go beyond our limits.

It is not easy; it is not a comfortable thing to do; but it is an important thing to do.

Jesus always pushed the envelope. His love and compassion came out of God's *inclusiveness; a radical inclusiveness*.

Today's text shows that reconciliation is possible; what we need is a little bit more tolerance, patience, and willingness to go make friends with strangers.

The simplest thing we need is the willingness and effort to go out and meet, talk, and break bread together with people we do not know-- just like the people who were on the TV program.

In fact, that's what Jesus did in his ministry.

We are a reconciling congregation; that means we welcome all people. But imagine one Sunday morning our sanctuary is flooded with all "the wrong" people: the drunk, drug addicts, criminals, and prostitutes... Do we have room for them?

I am not sure if I am ready for that, either. But we know what Jesus would do if he was the pastor of this church.

The gospel is radical; the love we hear from the scripture is a radical one. The Gospel really makes us uncomfortable.

How can we welcome and love those you do not like or feel comfortable with? It is tough!

We can only do so much because we have our own problems; that is what we say.

The scripture lessons this morning challenge us. 1 John 5 says, Jesus came to us, "not with the water only but with the water and the blood."

The water reminds us of our baptism: we are here because Jesus welcomes us. Water is a welcoming sign of the church.

But think of what that means—not just the water but the water and the blood? My hunch is that the text is telling us to push ourselves a little bit more to go out into the community and show our love.

The blood means sacrifice; love needs our life. Jesus shed his blood for his message of radical inclusiveness; he gave his life for it.

So, think about what we can do when we say we love Jesus and we are the followers of Jesus. Indeed, our hardest task is not loving one another, but doing so *as Jesus did*.

May God bless us as we continue to strive to follow Him in what he did.

Amen.