

May 15, Easter 5C (Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35)

## **Peter is hardly the first person to challenge the status quo because of something God told him in a dream.**

by [Sarah S. Scherschligt](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue

The 2021 movie *Belfast* is set in Northern Ireland in 1969. Buddy, a nine-year-old Protestant boy, has a crush on a Catholic classmate. He asks his father if he could have a future with her, and his father replies, “That wee girl can be a practicing Hindu, or Southern Baptist, or vegetarian Antichrist. But if she’s kind, and fair, and you two respect each other, she and her people are welcome in our house.”

Love and grace win the day, if not the war. This father’s ethos of welcome strikes me as deeply Christian, and indeed it’s what I find proclaimed in most churches in my Lutheran denomination. But it raises an important question: In Christian community, what are the standards for belonging? This is the subject of Peter’s vision in Acts, one of the most consequential moments in the early church.

Up until this point, the mission of Jesus and his disciples was directed at the people of Israel. Yes, a few notable outsiders received God’s care. But they were the exception, and they never became part of the community formed in Jesus’ name. Peter expands the terms of belonging. His vision gives him the spiritual authority to welcome non-Jewish believers, to draw the lines differently. Because of Peter’s vision, a God-fearing gentile can be welcomed with open arms.

The church has been asking questions about identity ever since. What do you need to do to be part of Jesus’ community? What rituals do you need to participate in? What earnestness in worship, and what generosity in giving? Less churchy questions, too: What sexual behavior is acceptable? What attitude toward guns, racism, or science? Can you vote for *that* guy and still belong here?

At root is the issue of authority. How do we decide? Scripture? Tradition? Based on whose interpretation? Traditional authority was upended in Peter’s vision, though

he's hardly the first person to challenge the status quo because of something God told him in a dream. It's hard to argue with "God told me this." Harder still to form a community among those who each claim God told them something different.

What's the proper alchemy between one person's experience or vision and the time-honored foundations of church doctrine? At one extreme stands a rigid, well-defined rationale for inclusion (and thereby exclusion), a la the Missouri Synod Lutheran doctrine of the church of my youth. Their practice of closed communion is the reason I left. At the other extreme is a church that holds a loose collection of individual opinions, along the lines of "live your truth," with nebulous communal theology. I love a lot of Unitarian Universalists, but Jesus has too great a claim on my identity for me to be one of them.

Churches that draw the wrong lines need the big erasers of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. But what about churches that draw no lines? "If you stand for nothing, Burr, what'll you fall for?" says Hamilton in the musical. I think this is relevant to the moment many Protestant communities find themselves in, with people leaving even as we're earnestly trying to expand the circle. I give us a lot of grace. We are trying to get love right. Jesus' community got pretty small there for a while.

I wonder what the guardrails of faith should be, but I do want them to exist. In my church, we say the Apostles' Creed each week, knowing full well that the diversity of faith represented even in our small congregation means very few of us believe the same things, though we are united by our words. "This is God's table. All are welcome here!" I say this every time I invite people to communion. Zoom worship has left me with even less authority over who participates or considers themselves part of our church. I err on the side of inclusion—but I wonder if our open arms are unwittingly causing spiritual harm. Is it faithful to take away all boundaries? If we reduce Christianity to a belief system with neither belief nor system, I fear we will replace it with a system of moral standards that are opposed to the gospel of grace.

In *Belfast*, the father doesn't simply say that everyone is welcome. He says they're welcome if they are kind and fair and respect others. That's a big *if*. Isn't the whole point of grace that Christ's love extends to those who are neither kind, nor fair, nor respectful? I need something besides my own goodness to be the basis for my welcome in Christ's church.

And so it goes on. We will always wrestle with these questions, because we will always encounter and love people who don't fit into our boxes. As a pastor, I take great comfort in knowing that questions of identity and belonging are as old as the church. I take my cue from Peter and his friends that the proper response to people wanting to join in is not "let us give you a quiz" but "this is a reason to praise God."

It gives me even more comfort to know the question isn't actually ours to answer. The heart of Christianity is never what we do; it is what God does. The community of God's people doesn't spring up from our activity; it comes from God. Peter's vision was, after all, from God and not of his own making. As long as we err on the side of love and stay open to the Holy Spirit's guidance, we follow the commandment Jesus gave the community formed in his name: to love one another, so people will know we are his disciples.