

“SACRED AND SECULAR”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture for today comes from the book of Acts 10:9-16.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

During my sabbatical I did a lot of things. I saw a lot of people. I had a lot of adventures, but by far my favorite memory was spending the day at the beach with my niece. She is two, almost three years old and she already has my heart. She’s got red hair. My sister has red hair. We don’t look anything alike, yet we are related. Her daughter has red hair as well. Up until last month when we got to spend a week in Michigan together in September, there were other relatives there, but she’s the main character.

Up until last month my husband has been her favorite. Not that it’s a competition.... But it is. I like to say kids and pets flock to my husband. They love him. He is really great. He is really great. So, kids, pets, people, they all flock to him and my niece is no different. But...I got to spend a week with her in Michigan without Uncle Zach and I may have just pulled ahead in the favorite department. Time will tell. I’ll see her in November and Uncle Zach will be there.

Anyway, we got to spend a couple of days at the beach and there was this one day that was just the best. It wasn't too hot, but it was warm. It was warm enough to be at the beach in a swimsuit. It was warm enough to be in the water and so...She's an only child. She's the only grandchild, so I'm like her sibling. So, we built sandcastles. We played in the waves. We chased birds along the beach. We had a great time.

Some of you have heard this, but a little back story. I was a camp counselor for two summers at a camp on Lake Michigan. So, water safety is huge. It's huge over there and it was drilled into our heads. So, when I was at the beach with my niece, I was never more than a couple of feet from her. She's a squirrely little two-year-old.

At one point we were, I don't know, rolling around in the waves or something and she just took off. She took off running. She's running along the water, waving her arms and singing a song from Moana – because when the mood strikes. And I had this brief moment – her parents were like far away. They were enjoying the fact that they don't have to run on the beach and be with her. They loved Aunt Alex that day.

So, I had this brief moment where I asked myself, now what? Do I yell at her and tell her to stop running and make her come back because she can't just run off along the water. She's two. Do I go with her to keep her safe? Now what? What do I do? I ended up joining her because I firmly believe that she should be able to run along the water singing, but also she can't swim, so I wasn't letting her out of my sight. So, we ended up both running along the water, singing Moana and waving our arms. It was the best day ever and I went to bed right after her because I was exhausted.

A couple of days later the weather changed, and it was kind of chilly and windy. It was more stereotypical weather for September in Michigan and my sister and her family were headed back to Tennessee and I volunteered to take my niece to the beach playground right down the road so that they could pack up with fewer distractions. So, my mom and I – my mom was there but she's not the main character, so my mom and I loaded up my niece and drove half a mile to the beach to a playground. And it's windy, and it's gray, and it's kinda cold and there are red flags telling you it's not safe to swim and my niece wants to go out to the lighthouse. You go to a pier and then walk out to the lighthouse, and I thought, okay we have to do this safely, so we negotiated safety protocol. She had to hold my hand the entire time, and she agreed so we took off to the pier.

We got part way there and there was a gate with a big sign, and it said, "DANGEROUS CONDITIONS" in big letters. Then it went on to say, the weather

was dangerous and so you couldn't go out on the pier. It was closed. I immediately worried that she wouldn't understand and would have a tantrum, but I explained the sign said dangerous conditions. That means the weather is not good. See those waves. Those are really big waves. They weren't her a few days ago, were they? The weather is different. It's choppy. It's not safe to be out on the water today. She looked at me and repeated back, "dangerous conditions". So we turned around and I was a little worried that she would be afraid of the beach from then on, that I had maybe caused some irreparable harm teaching her about dangerous conditions but a few days later we were face-timing and she said to me that the next time we see each other we will go to the beach together.

So, somehow in her two-year-old brain she understood that the beach is both/and. It's a place that can have dangerous conditions and it's a place where you can run and play in the water and the sand. It can be stormy one day and hot the next. It's a both/and.

In our scripture passage in Acts 10 Peter has a vision that was confusing to him. He had been taught not to eat certain animals, that they were unclean and then he has this vision where those same animals are permitted. God spoke to Peter in this vision and tells him that indeed the animals are now clean and this is a really big deal. It's a big mind shift for Peter. It was so big that this isn't the only thing that happens in Acts that does this.

Earlier, right before this, Peter goes and he stays at the house of a tanner which is someone who works with animals and that would have been completely unacceptable. That's very taboo. Not allowed, but he did it. Then he has this vision saying that these animals are clean and he can eat them.

Then a little bit later in Acts, the Gentiles, the non-Jews, received the Holy Spirit, showing that they are included in God's people, so we have this huge mind shift happening. God is at work throughout Acts, well throughout history. But, we see God helping to change minds and helping Peter and the Jews to have this big shift in how they see the world. They were used to seeing things a certain way. They were used to kind of a more black and white perspective. They were used to the sacred vs the secular mindset. That there were things that were holy and good and right and then there were other things that were not holy or secular or common. There were these categories. There were places where God showed up and there were places where God didn't. There were people that God approved of and there were people that God didn't.

They had these categories and we do this as well. We put places and things and people in categories. We regulate God to certain areas of our lives. We see church as sacred, but where we go to work as secular.

We expect God to be at church but not when we go to work during the week.

We expect God to be present with us in our evening prayers but not the next morning when we are yelling at our spouse.

We act a certain way at church, right? And then perhaps a little bit differently when we are cut off on the highway driving later.

But God is not limited. God is not bound by our preconceived notions. God is not regulated to this times and spaces where we decide to think that God is there. So why do we do this? Why do we think this way?

I think because it can be easier. It's easier to say the beach is dangerous. Period. You can't go there. Right? Easy! Easier than saying, the beach can be dangerous, and it can be relaxing. That's more complicated.

It's a lot easier to say God is in the church than it is to say God is present with us in worship and when we yell at each other at home. Both/And.

It's a lot easier to relegate God to church or to certain spaces or places than to have to deal with this complicated reality that God is with us even when we have the worst day at work. Even when things are not going well in our secular lives. That's more complicated because then we have to think when we are home and mad at a family member, oh yeah, God is here too. Maybe I might act differently. We might have to ask ourselves, now what? It's a bit more complicated.

I think that my niece, at two, can understand that the beach is not just a dangerous place and it's not just a place for fun, that's relaxing and peaceful. It's complicated. It's both/and. So, I think we can also understand it of God as well. The beach always has the capacity to be a place of joy and delight, a place for relaxing, a place that has danger as well, because that is what water is for us as humans. Large bodies of water.

But every time and place in our lives has the capacity to be holy and sacred, because God is everywhere always. Because that's just who God is.

So, what are some places or spaces that you see as secular or not sacred. Think about it. Where or when in your daily routine or your weekly routine do you perhaps feel the furthest from God?

I invite you this week to start expecting God to be there because God already is.
Both/And.

Amen? Amen.