

Scripture Reference: Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 3:13-17

I've been "binge watching" a show on Netflix. I haven't watched the entire series yet, but I don't think you have to watch all of the episodes in one sitting to call it "binge watching". I think I can still call it "binge watching" as I tend to watch 3 or more episodes at a time - at least two, and never just one. The show is called Heartland and at the center of all of the activity is the Heartland Ranch. Heartland Ranch is home to a family that is glued together by an unfortunate tragedy. The series follows Amy Fleming who discovers she has the same ability as her now deceased mother to aid injured horses, and who seems to have the ability to maintain good relationships with a variety of people and personalities as well. At Heartland, we watch Amy work with horses; she spends time "joining" them with herself or their trainers or owners, and kind of "counseling" some of them through emotional issues caused from some form of trauma.

The horses at Heartland come from a wide range of backgrounds. Some have come from the wild, some have been abandoned by farmers and ranchers who lost the economic battle, some are rodeo horses that need additional training, some belong to royalty from other countries... The thing is, ALL of these horses are treated with the same care - Amy doesn't judge, she doesn't play favorites. And as challenging as it might be at times, each horse in her care gets the time and attention needed to make them healthy again and it doesn't matter where they came from.

Sound familiar? What did Peter say? "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34) This was one of the most challenging situations that Peter had to face in his life and ministry. We hear Peter saying that God doesn't play favorites, but up to this point, that's not really what people believed. You see, up to this point, everyone in the church, everyone who followed Jesus was a Jew, or at least a half-Jew. So it was just assumed that to become a Christian, you first had to convert to Judaism. In this reading, Peter is telling the people a different truth. God is at work in people who are not Jews, people who are very different from Peter himself. And Peter gets it - God doesn't play favorites, everyone matters to God. This idea that even non-Jews mattered to God was a mystery that had been described by Paul as a mystery kept hidden for generations but was now being revealed to the Lord's people. (Colossians 1:26) In Ephesians 3:6, Paul revealed what that hidden mystery was: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The big mystery, the big "change" that people needed to accept was that it didn't matter where people came from, it didn't matter which side of the tracks they were born on, it didn't matter if they were Jew or Gentile - Everyone was important, everyone mattered to God.

In reading Peter's story, we hear Peter tell the people that all the prophets testified that everyone who believed in Jesus would receive forgiveness of their sins; and that while Peter was speaking those words, the Holy Spirit came down on ALL the people who were listening to, who actually heard Peter's message. (Acts 10:43-44) The Bible says that some of the believers who had come with Peter were absolutely astonished that the Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles (Acts 10:45). I'm guessing the Peter was also a little surprised... Later, Peter would be heard to say that, "...if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (Acts 11:17) How do you argue with something like that right?!

God was treating the Gentiles with the same regard He was treating the Jews. A bit unheard of at the time, and yet there it was. The Holy Spirit was gifted to all who heard the word of God and believed.

We first saw the gift of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism. Jesus went to the Jordan River where John was baptizing the people in the water. Jesus asked that John give him the same honor, to baptise him with the water. A baptism of water that John performed in order to symbolize a cleansing from sin. A baptism of water that Jesus sought in order to show obedience to God, to "fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 13:15) Jesus was baptized as a sign of his dedication - his wholehearted obedience - to God his Father. He was baptized as an example to us of obedience and repentance. Jesus' baptism is transformed in our own baptismal experience. We don't simply get baptized because he did, Jesus is more than just a role model for us to follow, we are baptized INTO Him and He baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that was gifted to all who heard the words offered by Peter; the same Spirit that is offered to all who truly believe. Baptism makes it possible for us to be made clean from our sin, to dedicate our lives to God. Following Christ's baptism and the witness of the Holy Spirit descending and alighting on him, following Peter's experiences that opened him to communities of Gentiles, Baptism into Christ, and through Christ by the Holy Spirit, is offered to any who believe -

This wasn't an easy thing for the first followers of Christ to adjust to. They had to put away all their biases and prejudices. They had to adjust their way of thinking about God - People still have to adjust their way of thinking about God...

God wants to save every person, regardless of where they are from, where they have been, how smart they are - or are not. Regardless of their beauty, their importance in our secular world, or of their skills. God loves us all: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

(Acts 10:43)

The truth of the matter is that God's thoughts and ways are much bigger and much higher than our own. As human beings, we often think we know it all; and we often believe that our own ways of thinking are far better than someone else's way of thinking... and that includes that we sometimes believe that our ways and our thoughts are better than even God's... That is harsh, but it is reality...

We - and by "we" I am specifically talking about me, and about others in our world who claim christianity - We like to think of ourselves as enlightened, tolerant, and unprejudiced people, but are we really?

To be intolerant, unenlightened, and prejudiced in the United States, we often believe that people are misunderstanding and mistreating someone of a different race or ethnic background. I know the first thing I think of when I hear the word "prejudice" is the struggle of racism faced in our country, primarily in the 1960's. Martin Luther King Junior was a champion in that battle against prejudice, and he worked hard to love people on both sides of the racial divide, opting to use words instead of weapons and seeking love and peace instead of hatred... We still have very public battles regarding skin color, but our prejudices and intolerances go beyond just the color of people's skin. It is not my intention today to talk about who is right or who is wrong regarding ANY area of prejudice or intolerance. Who am I to make that judgement? Humanity will be judged - that fact is clear. Scripture also makes it clear that God will be the judge of humanity - not me... Psalm 9 tells us: "...the Lord sits enthroned forever, he has established his throne for judgement. He judges the world

with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity.” (Psalm 9:7-8) And God the Father has entrusted the task of judgment to God the Son. “The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22)

Judgment of the world will be done by God and Him alone. It will not be accomplished by angels or any other creatures - certainly not by me.

In the meantime, while we wait for that day of final judgement, How are we to respond to behaviors that stem from intolerance and prejudice? “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.” (1 John 4:16) We are to care for each other. We are to love each other. And we are to care for and love ALL of the “each others” in our world... There is scripture that supports this path:

“...if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2b)

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

And perhaps most pointedly:

“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20)

The love of Christ should cause us to seek to understand before we judge. This love should cause us to value, love, and care for every person made in God’s image. And so like Peter, who I’m guessing did not agree with everything concerning the Gentiles, we may need to relinquish some of our control, some of our ideas about who is worthy, and let God do some big work in our lives; helping us to see that through baptism we are called to become true disciples of Christ - baptised into Christ, and through Christ, the Holy Spirit; our baptisms should make us the kind of people God originally created us to be...

Like Amy Fleming at Heartland, who “joins” with her horses, We need to “join” with God - We need to “join” with other children of God to be who He created us to be. We need to show patience, understanding, be willing to listen and willing to learn. As challenging as it might be, we owe it to each other, to ALL of each other, regardless of skin color, academic accomplishments, economic status, height, weight, age, or anything else... Whether we come from the wild, were abandoned, or have royal blood in our veins...We have to accept the fact that God loves all of us, and He wants us to do the same, not by standing in judgment of one another, but by accepting each other as part of the family of God - each a child of God - each Loved by a God who doesn’t play favorites but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right... AMEN