

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian
Sermon
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Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Building Bridges”

Scripture Texts: Galatians 2:7-14
Acts 10:34-43

Dear people of God, have any of you ever driven over the Confederation Bridge that joins Prince Edward Island to New Brunswick on the Canadian mainland? It’s the longest bridge to run continuously over a stretch of sea that during winter is ice. The bridge was finally completed in June of 1997, after four years of construction. It stretches over 42,000 feet. That’s about eight miles. The cost for this massive undertaking was around \$1,000,000,000. There were many politicians and citizens who voiced their strong opposition to starting and finishing such a project. Many others questioned the need for such a bridge. After all, they said, what’s wrong with the good old-fashioned ferry? But others saw the future benefits that would accrue in terms of the local and national economy. Despite the wariness of some and the outright opposition of others, the bridge was built, and with the passage of time, and in light of the benefits that came as a direct result of the bridge being in place, the

decision to build it was vindicated.

The number of tourists visiting Prince Edward Island has increased 20% annually since 1996, the year before the bridge was built, and more food is being exported from the island, especially potatoes. This has resulted in more potato production, creating more jobs, including jobs in new food processing plants for French fries and potato chips. Exporting of seafood products has also increased. In addition, a revolution in the island's retail sector has occurred since the opening of the bridge. Big box stores, such as Walmart, Sears, Staples, and Home Depot, almost impossible to find before 1997 on the island, are now plentiful. With the construction of the Confederation Bridge, Prince Edward Island has truly entered the 21st century. As controversial as it was at the beginning, the overwhelming majority of Prince Edward Islanders are now convinced that building the bridge was a good idea. The only negative effect of the bridge was that many smaller, locally owned stores have gone out of business. But many politicians and financial experts have concluded that they would have gone out of business anyway as they would not have been able to compete in the technologically advanced 21st century even without the Confederation Bridge being built.

In a sense, this kind of controversy and newness confronted the early church when they began to evangelize. All of the early church members were Jewish, for perhaps the first ten or even fifteen years of church history. They had grown up in a Jewish environment, whether in Jerusalem where the Great Temple stood, or in cities and towns in Judea, Galilee, or in strategic cities throughout the Roman Empire. If they did not live close to Jerusalem, where they could regularly worship at the temple, they were taught by local rabbis in synagogues. All Jews were steeped in the Law of Moses, regardless of where they lived. And regardless of where they lived, if asked, they would not have considered themselves to be anything other than faithful Israelites. Any faithful Jew would keep the commandments of Moses, especially those that strictly prohibited having any association with Gentiles.

We in this country really cannot conceive how difficult it would have been for an early Jewish Christian to accept that God wanted the Gospel to be preached to non-Jews. Simply put, the early church had to be converted, not in the sense of becoming Christians; they had already done that. No, the conversion experience which they needed was a transformation in their thinking and attitudes toward those who were

Gentiles, toward those who were from a different religious, political, and cultural background. Religion for the ancient Jew was a way of life. It wasn't just a matter of memorizing some verses of the Torah, making the appropriate animal sacrifices, and attending synagogue on Saturday. Jewish religion, politics, and culture were one. Devotion to any one of these three meant devotion to all of them.

In ancient Israel, there was no such thing as separation of church and state, which we take for granted in this nation today. Ancient Israel's political kingdom was a theocracy, that is, the king, whoever he was, whether, David or Solomon, would rule the nation according to the laws of the religion of the state, which was Judaism.

I go into this background to try to get you to understand just how difficult it was in the early church to reach out to the non-Jews, to build bridges to the Gentiles. Gentiles were not just those of another religion. They were of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. They were alien to the Jews in every way.

The person God chose to build the initial bridge across this religious, political, and cultural chasm that separated Jew from Gentile was the apostle Paul. But the apostle Peter, who was given the vocation

by God to preach to the Jews, also had to be on board in this matter. You could not have the two chief apostles of this new religion of Christianity at odds with each other on this very important matter. And so, in our scripture lessons today, God wants to teach the apostle Peter that Gentiles who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Redeemer must be accepted as equal brothers and sisters in the faith, just as if they were Jewish. Though the apostle Paul would be the chief evangelist to the Gentiles, Peter, I think, was chosen by God to preach to Cornelius, a Gentile, not only because of the apostle's high standing in the early Church, but also because he needs to learn something very valuable.

As revered as Peter was by the early Christian community, he was far from perfect. He had his prejudices. He was raised to be a good Jew. That meant that he would regard Gentiles as "dogs," as those with whom he would never associate. He wouldn't allow them into his home, for they were unclean. He wouldn't sit at table with them, for they ate unclean food. Peter, being a typical Jew, believed that God's election of Israel meant the rejection of the Gentiles. God could not love anyone who was not Jewish. Gentiles were religiously and racially inferior to the people of Israel. This was what Peter was raised to believe. This was what all

devout Jews believed.

And so God had to work somehow among the early Church to teach them to rid themselves of the ageless problems of religious and racial bigotry. Even Peter, though he was an apostle, needed to be transformed in his thinking. The entire Jewish Christian Church at that time needed transformation. A new spiritual kingdom was being erected in Christ, and that meant that outdated beliefs and prejudices had to be abandoned.

This was not going to be easy. It has never been easy in church history for Christians to change. Look how long it has taken for women to be accepted as equal members in the Church. We Congregationalists are rightly proud that we ordained the first woman minister, Antoinette Brown, since New Testament times. But what year was that? 1853. It took 1800 years for the Christian Church to acknowledge that a woman can be called to ordained ministry in the same way that God calls men. And even then, it wasn't until the 1970s that women were regularly attending seminary and being ordained and taking their place alongside men as clergy in UCC congregations.

Change is never easy. Long held beliefs are hard to give up. But if we become exposed to new surroundings and new people, then we grow

in our knowledge and in our attitudes, and change becomes inevitable, even welcomed. What's the most effective way to build bridges with people today?

In preparation for our church's 125th anniversary a couple of years ago, I was going through some old Park Congregational Church Annual Reports. As I was perusing through the report for 1958, I noticed that Rev. Joe Beach recorded 909 visits that year. Wow, I thought, he must have put a lot of mileage on his car! But as I continued to read, I figured out that it was not so much that he visited people, but that people visited him. During his regular office hours in the old church, parishioners would drop in on him, quite often 10 a day. In those days, almost the entire membership lived in the Elm Park neighborhood and would stop into the building on the corner of Russell and Elm streets, probably on their way to do other errands.

Well, that doesn't happen anymore. I keep office hours, like Rev. Beach did, but I don't get nearly as many visits as he did. My colleague in Marlborough, Rev. Kaz Bem, decided to have his office hours not in the church, but rather, in a local coffee shop. The result has been an increase in the number of parishioners who have come to see him! Maybe

I should start keeping my office hours in the local Starbucks. Would more of you come to see me?

We live in a different world today from 55 years ago. How do people connect today? What's the best way to build bridges today? Ask any young person. They know the answer. The answer is through the Internet and social media. Whether or not Al Gore coined the term, "the Information Superhighway," to refer to the World Wide Web, there's no doubt that's an accurate description of the Internet telecommunications network. That's how people connect today: through email, facebook, twitter, and blogging on the Internet. That's not only the future of communication; that's the present.

Through the expertise of Kimberly Pelkey, we have totally redesigned our church's website. Kimberly has donated much of her time in transferring the information from our old website to our new one. Unfortunately, the *Towers* and my sermons could not be transferred, so I must give her those one by one, and so it will take a bit longer to put those on the new website, but little by little they too will be added.

I'm going to give all of you homework for this week. I gave my Confirmation Class homework, so I can give all of you homework also. I

want all of you to visit the church's website and let either Kimberly or me know what you think about it. I also want all of you to visit our church's Facebook page, and make comments if you would. At least hit "like" if you read something that you indeed like. The addresses for the website and Facebook page are right on the inside of the bulletin every Sunday. But now Kimberly has included a link on our website that takes you directly to the Facebook page, so you can reach it that way.

If we want to reach out to others so that they become familiar with us in this church, this is the way to do it. We don't live in the 1950s anymore when the minister didn't have to do any outreach or evangelism because new families would show up at the church on their own. We cannot continue with business as usual, just as Peter could not continue with business as usual. As God was showing him that he had to reach out to those who were different from him in almost every possible way, so we too must be open to God's leading and be willing to reach out to people in new ways, by the means of our wider culture. God led Peter not just to a Gentile neighborhood, but right through the front door of a Gentile's house. This was sort of like shock therapy for Peter, who had never associated with anything unclean in his entire life. Now he had to enter

the very dwelling of unclean people. This was not only going to be repugnant to Peter personally, but after this event, he would be considered by many of his fellow Jews to be a traitor, an apostate of the Jewish faith, not an apostle of the Christian faith.

Despite the happy ending of this story as it is found in the Book of Acts as Brittany read it, I read a passage from the apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians to show how difficult it was for the early church leaders, including Peter, to stick with this new attitude of acceptance of the Gentiles as equal members of Christ's body. The Letter to the Galatians was written after the episode of Peter and Cornelius in Acts chapter 10. And so, we see in that episode in Antioch that Paul relates in the reading this morning that Peter backslid on the issue of accepting Gentile believers into table fellowship because he feared what the believers sent from the apostle James would think. Even Barnabas, who was Paul's co-worker on his early missionary journeys, the apostle who convinced the early church to accept Saul of Tarsus as a genuine believer and no longer a persecutor of the church, yes, Barnabas, to whom Paul was the closest of any Christian, had to be chided by Paul, for even he was led astray by hypocrisy in refusing to eat with the Gentile believers in Antioch.

Change is hard. The apostle Paul for a long time didn't know if his vision of the Gospel would win out, if the early church would truly accept Gentiles as fellow believers with equal rights. There may have been many holdouts in the early church who never accepted the view that Gentiles could become Christians without needing to become Jewish first. In fact, a few scholars think that even the apostle James, the Lord's brother, never accepted that view, despite his recorded agreement at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

Building bridges is not easy work. The cost is often higher than expected. Unforeseen obstacles are encountered along the way. Criticism from others will be constant. But building bridges is what God expects from us, for it is the divine will that all should come to a knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ and become members of his church. Amen.