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Imagine you're sitting outside, resting, waiting for dinner, when suddenly, you have this mystical vision of a sheet filled with animals dropping down from the sky. It's filled with all kinds of animals, and although you're hungry, you would never consider preparing any of them for a meal. You do enjoy your occasional hamburger or tenderloin or fish dinner, but this collection contains animals you would never consider eating. You hear a voice telling you to prepare a meal, and you find yourself squirming at the idea of eating these particular meats, for you consider them unfit to eat. You hear a voice proclaim, "What God has called good, you must not consider unfit."

Just then you hear a knock at the door, and when you answer, you encounter a person inviting you to go and visit someone you dislike, someone you consider profane who doesn't live what you consider the right kind of life. The person you're invited to visit has made choices you don't agree with—maybe a different political party than your own, a different sexual orientation, a different religion. The person may speak another language or come from an ethnic background different from your own. Even though this person

trusts in God, you don't want to hang out with the one who's inviting you to come and visit.

That's essentially what happened to Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. The Book of Acts tells about his vision of a sheet of unclean animals. Visitors invited him to meet with Cornelius, a Gentile, an outsider. Reluctantly, Peter went to his house, but while there, he finally got it. The scripture we heard read today was the conclusion of his visit as Peter realized that God accepted everyone, even those who were different from himself. While there, the Spirit came upon everyone, they joined the church, and they were baptized. Peter discovered that he could dance with the Spirit and welcome others to join him, even those who often don't get invited to the dance.

Not everyone is comfortable with this notion of God welcoming everyone, and I once served a church where I was called "too liberal" because I would invite anyone to church. I welcomed a Latinx family with ten children to worship, and they came. They were there every time we had an event. The little ones squirmed during worship and crawled under the pews. Some members complained they were distracting their worship and wanted them gone.

During a church dinner one week, some church folks decided to serve the meal rather than letting everyone

serve themselves as we normally did. When I inquired about the recent change, I was told, “Cause we don’t want those kids touching our food.”

When someone suggested I ask the family to not come to our church anymore, I refused. Instead, some good church folks called around to one another and had a meeting while I was gone. They decided I was not welcome at their church either as their pastor, and they told me not to come back.

In another church, someone once asked me, “Preacher, I want to come to worship and hear things that make me feel good. Why are you always talking about welcoming those I don’t agree with or about controversial topics?” I replied, “Well, it’s in the Bible. That’s what Jesus did. I think that’s what I’m supposed to do.” The person replied, “I guess the Bible makes me uncomfortable then.”

The Bible does that. It makes us feel uncomfortable at times. Yes, the pages are filled with God’s grace and unconditional love, but it’s also filled with stories of those often left out who want to be heard. Stories of those who really messed up their lives. Stories of political drama and corruption. Stories of temptation and sin. Stories about people like you

and me. It doesn’t always feel good to read these stories, and in a Bible study I once asked the group why writers left these difficult stories in the Bible. Someone replied, “If they left only the pretty stories in, we might not be able to relate, for the reality of our life is also filled with struggles.”

God invites us to dance with all types of people, even though it’s hard work, which is something dancer Twyla Tharp understands, especially during a pandemic. She has dance students from all over the world, and teaching them choreography via Zoom can be a challenge. She explained,

One dancer was in New York at noon. One dancer was on the West Coast before breakfast. One dancer was in Denmark five hours ahead, and one dancer was in St. Petersburg working through their dinner hour. Nothing was capable of keeping us from having community. And that’s what dance can give — dance can give community.<sup>1</sup>

Twyla recognizes that even people from different time zones can create community, something we’ve discovered as well. Through our livestream from Elkhart and radio from Mishawaka, we’re connecting to people we may not even know, building a community beyond the walls of our church buildings. Some of those people may have even felt

like an outsider when visiting a church in person, and yet, we welcome them to listen in and worship with us.

As we invite them to the dance of faith with us, we might discover they have something to teach us as well. Twyla Tharp explained how she selects dancers with variety, with different body types for her dances:

In order to be inclusive, you need to have differentiation. So by having [different dancers who are] tall, short, classically trained, [without] classic training, [a] great athlete — all of these various qualities would redefine and give a three-dimensional quality to the work.

I know that some people would like church to return back to the way it was before the pandemic, to worship just like we used to in the good ole days when we could hug and pass communion to one another and not wear a mask. Unfortunately, that's not the world we live in today. We have given up something that we cherish, and yet, God invites us to continue dancing with the Spirit in new ways, welcoming new dance partners who may not dance the same way we do. The church is not about you and

me and doing what we've always done before. It's about listening to God and trying new dance steps as the Spirit leads us in new directions, trying something new.

Just imagine what it would be like if Peter had said after his vision, "That's a nice idea God—about welcoming everyone, but I'm just not sure I could do that. I like the way things are right now. Let's not make any changes. I don't want to visit Corneilius, because he's not like me."

Without that early movement of Jesus followers welcoming those outside the norms, you and I would not be included. We'd still be on the outside. We may have never heard about Jesus or discovered that we're also included in God's love. We'd be standing outside the dance hall, watching others dance without us.

Those early followers of Jesus knew that change was in the air. Life wasn't the same anymore. Although they weren't in the middle of a pandemic, their lives had been turned upside down by the amazing news that Jesus still lived among them. They continued to trust God. They invented new dance steps as they danced with the Spirit, who continues to invite us to welcome everyone to join in dancing with the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Dance Can Give Community': Twyla Tharp On Choreographing Through Lockdown, April 8, 2021, [www.npr.org/2021/04/08/985290016/dance-can-give-community-twyla-tharp-on-choreographing-through-lockdown](http://www.npr.org/2021/04/08/985290016/dance-can-give-community-twyla-tharp-on-choreographing-through-lockdown)