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Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

Acceptable to God

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

When I heard, this week that a Ukrainian airplane crashed in Iran. At first, it was reported as an accident. Then, the news reported that it had been shot down by an Iranian missile. Then we heard that this was not true and that the plane was on fire and had tried to return to the airport. Then, we heard that it was, in fact, an Iranian missile and that the Ukrainian plane, flying very close to sensitive military sites, was mistaken for another US military strike, like the one that had only hours before assassinated a high-level Iranian military official. Even someone who has decided exactly what they believe is true, must admit that the layers of confusing information has been intense. None of us can be faulted for being confused. And that is only an example of confusion on an international level.

We don't have to go to the international news to find confusion. Confusion is a part of our everyday lives. Right after Christmas, I purchased a book on prayer and Christian living that I wanted to have on my phone so that I could listen to it without having my computer in the room. I purchased the book online and downloaded it to my computer, but I could not for the life of me figure out how to get it loaded onto my phone. I won't even tell you how much time I spent trying to figure out how to make my computer, my phone and iTunes do what I wanted – to no avail. It was frustrating, confusing and I gave up on finding a person that I could ask to help, getting lost in chat worm holes is enough to drive one mad. It took two of my young adult daughters a couple of hours to figure out how to do it, and even when it was done, I asked the triumphant 20 year old what she did, and she admitted that she wasn't exactly sure. "I just kept trying things, until it worked" she said.

None of us can be faulted for being confused. And Scripture knows us, gets us and describes human beings in just this state of confusion.

Most of the Israelites are living in Babylon – far, far away from home – serving a foreign king as slaves because of the military defeat of the nation of Israel. They feel like God has forgotten and/or judged them lacking, or that perhaps there is no "god" and that maybe, "might does make right" – and the Babylonian army is in that sense "very right." But the prophet Isaiah says, "No", God has called his people for a "good reason" and will take them by the hand and guard them. God will give them to the nations of the world as a promise, that God will give light, freedom and sight to the world through them. (Isaiah 42:6) Their exile in Babylon has in no way

defeated God's purpose in the world or thwarted God's purpose for Israel. "I am the Lord!" says God. Don't be confused.

And, in Acts, Peter is also confused. Raised as a faithful Jew, Peter knew what God wanted. Following the rules of the Jewish faith – like kosher eating and keeping oneself morally and physically pure by not associating with who and what was unclean – were basic and undisputed expectations. And yet, Peter had a vision in which he was told not to call unclean what God made clean (Acts 10:10:15), and immediately he is invited by unclean Gentiles to come and to speak to an unclean, Gentile Centurion by the name of Cornelius. And when Peter goes – in uncertain obedience – God sends the Holy Spirit upon a whole group of people that – according to the undisputed Jewish law – were unclean and beyond the pale of God's work in the world.

And, in what is arguably the central message of the whole Gospel preached by Luke, Peter says, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35 CEB) And he goes on to connect this new understanding with the way God has worked through Jesus Christ for the reconciliation and salvation of the whole world.

Solving the puzzle of what is true in the chaos of international affairs, or even in the swirling of our own national politics is beyond both our scope, my knowledge, and a matter of ongoing debate, but there are some very practical implications for our Christian faith and for the purpose and work of this congregation that come from these two passages of Scripture. We all have our own opinions on what ought to happen in the future with Iran and Iraq, or about what should be the outcome of the impeachment trial in the Senate, but there is really not confusion in Scripture when it comes to what is acceptable to God and how God wants us to live in the world.

What is acceptable to God is to worship God alone, and to trust in God, no matter the current circumstances, to bring justice, light, freedom and life to those around us and to the world. What God wants us to do – as servants of God - is to work dutifully and in humility for justice and mercy in the world and to refuse to worship any God, but the true God. And just in case we are confused about which god to worship, Isaiah says we are talking about the God "who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it, and spirit to those who walk in it." (Isa 42:5)

So, on this day when we ordain and install new leadership for our congregation, and as we contemplate how we want to live in the confusing and partisan world in which we find ourselves, Scripture has some guidance about what is acceptable to God.

First, the command is to worship only the true God, which might sound obvious except for the fact that we are experts at saying that we worship the one true God when we really spend much more time, energy and money on other gods. We are not to worship ourselves, power, security, sexuality, influence or security. Peter was so sure that what God required was adherence to the moral law that God had to tell him three times in a dream to quit worshipping

the moral code so that Peter could be useful to the Gospel and willing to preach to Cornelius and his household. In our own lives, I think this requires us to think honestly about where we spend most of our energy, time and money. And in the leadership of Christ's Church I think it means that we have got to get over our fixation on the belief that obedience to any moral code is the only way to be loved by God so that we will be able to do what God calls us to be – to bring good news and justice to those who need it and are receptive to know God. A moral code is not unimportant; it is just not what we worship. I am increasingly convinced that this thing we call Christian community – this thing we call Church – is either about following Jesus and loving God or it is time to quit. Being Christian is NOT about being a member of an institution or group. Being Christian is about following Jesus. And if we are not about following Jesus, then we are something other than a community of Christ – a Church!

Second, the picture of one who is a follower of Christ is remarkably consistent throughout Scripture. A follower of Christ – one who loves God – is one who is humble, faithful, persistent, endures in all circumstances, seeks truth and works without fail in the world for the purposes of mercy, justice and love.

Maybe it is time for us to say again, with passion and intention, "We really are learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to God. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ; He is Lord of all! All the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Unless we just want to remain confused – or claim to be confused – so that we won't have to change our minds and our actions – we need not be confused about what is acceptable to God. What we are about is loving, serving and worshiping the God, who has been active in the world since its creation and whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ. Peter got in trouble with the higher ups back in Jerusalem, because he didn't follow protocol, but instead followed God's leading. We may get in trouble with the world if we choose to follow Christ in an age and culture that calls us to hate our enemies and where truth is often hidden. But, in the confusion of our day and in the rapid change in which we live, the time has come to be ruthlessly clear about who we worship and what God calls us to be and to do, no matter what it may cost us.

O Lord, give us the clarity and the courage to hear your voice and to get up and follow your direction. May we, like Peter, refuse to follow the protocols that keep us from being useful for YOUR Kingdom, and be given the faith to love, to serve, to give and to worship with no restraint. O God, may we be acceptable in your sight. Amen.