

I. Advanced organizer

- A. **Larycia Hawkins was born the grand-daughter of the founder and pastor of an African-American church in Okalahoma City.** By six years old she professed faith in God. After her grandfather passed when Larycia was eleven, her family moved to a different church, one that was predominantly white, and her faith continued to deepen. She attended Rice University, a prestigious liberal arts school in Texas, where she found community in campus fellowships that were predominantly white. So when after graduate school, **Larycia was hired to teach Political Science at Wheaton college in 2007, an evangelical institution outside of Chicago, she had decades of experience navigating her deep faith and her academic curiosity in majority white settings.** Larycia entered the tenure track, and was granted tenure on schedule in 2013, the first African-American female professor to receive tenure there. But there was often tension beneath the surface, which came to a head last December.
- B. In December 2015, in the wake of cries from a candidate for the republican presidential nomination to ban Muslims in the United States, **Larycia decided to don a hijab for the month of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas.** This was a spiritual practice for Larycia she said, **an act of what she called “embodied solidarity”, arguing that just as Jesus had taken on physical body**, and all of the vulnerability that comes with that, to live out solidarity with each of us as human beings, **she believed Jesus was inviting majority culture followers to demonstrate physical solidarity with today’s marginalized people groups.** And so she would take on the bias, the anger, the fear that is projected at Muslims in our current cultural climate, as an act of love. **In a facebook post explaining her actions she said this: “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God”.**
- C. **This was too much for many who were associated with Wheaton College.** The reaction was swift from concerned parents and alumni who threatened to pull their children or withhold their year-end contributions if Wheaton did not respond strongly. The provost of the university characterized the financial threat as one that could imperil 15 to 20 faculty jobs. Something had to be done. **Larycia was put on immediate leave, and asked to explain herself theologically.** Larycia participated in the process but stood by her actions and her solidarity with Muslims. Her tenure was rescinded and in January she was officially terminated for violating the Wheaton Statement of Belief, at least in spirit, if not in the letter, in the University’s eyes. Six weeks later or so, after pressure from students, faculty, and other outside voices who supported Dr. Hawkins, the University reversed it’s position and said they’d reinstate her, but at this point it was too late. Larycia Hawkins knew she was not safe in that setting and was no longer interested in working for Wheaton. She took a job at the University of Virginia, and admitted recently to a reporter for the *New York Times* that **she’s wary to even consider working in the white evangelical world again at this point.** The sting of her recent rejection is too painful.
- D. Wrapping up “All About Connection” series
- E. **God wants each of us to be connected - isolation is bad, connection is good. Important for human flourishing.**
1. **Following this theme through the Bible** from the first stories about the pain of disconnection between humanity and the Divine, all the way up to last week - a climactic point in the whole narrative.
 2. **Jesus has made a way** to help connect human beings to one another, to themselves, to God.

- F. **How do we think about connection and collective identity?** We have an “us”, but how does our “us” relate to all the other “us”s? How do we relate to “them”?
- G. This seems to be what was at issue for Larycia Hawkins. What got her fired ultimately was her refusal to react to the “them” of Muslims in a way that was deemed appropriate to the “us” of the predominantly white evangelical institution she was a part of. By expressing solidarity with another group, even saying that they “worshipped the same God” people feared she was misrepresenting the distinctiveness of their own group, which she was supposed to speak for and defend.
- H. Does connecting with Jesus create an “us” category that has to see the rest of the world as “them”?
- I. Or could it be as we sometimes say in Blue Ocean world, “Everyone is us”. We talk about “centered set” vs “bounded set”, being more about what unites us than the categories that separate us. If that’s so (“Everyone is us”), what does that mean?
- J. Early church had their own process of figuring out “us” and “them”, and I think it’s crucial for us to look at as we sort out these questions. Remember, the whole story we’ve been operating in has been the “us” of the people of Israel. The Jewish people were the big “us” and anyone who wasn’t born Jewish or somehow grafted into the Jewish people was the “them”. And after Jesus died, and came back, and commissioned his closest followers to follow in his footsteps, and then ascended back to heaven, this all still took place within this “us” group. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, and all the people gathered experienced divine empowerment from God, it was still all in the “us” group. Many languages, many regional cultural expressions, but ultimately still all Jewish believers. And then the big revolution came.
- K. We’re gonna look at a text in the book of Acts that happens right after the moment of revolution, as we see how this group of early Jewish followers of Jesus dealt with what was changing in their midst.
- II. Text: Acts 11
- A. Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. 2 But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. 3 “You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!” they said.**
- 4 Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. 5 “I was in the town of Joppa,” he said, “and while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. 6 When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of tame and wild animals, reptiles, and birds. 7 And I heard a voice say, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.’**
- 8 “‘No, Lord,’ I replied. ‘I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure or unclean.’**
- 9 “But the voice from heaven spoke again: ‘Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.’ 10 This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven.**
- 11 “Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. 12 The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry that they were Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon entered the home of the man who had sent for us. 13 He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his**

home and had told him, ‘Send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. 14 He will tell you how you and everyone in your household can be saved!’

15 “As I began to speak,” Peter continued, “the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. 16 Then I thought of the Lord’s words when he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17 And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God’s way?”

18 When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, “We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life.”

B. God challenges his followers to see outsiders in a new way.

1. First - **the challenge came from God**. Not from Peter. He kept having this vision. Eat the unclean food.
2. From unclean to clean (explain what this meant). Goes back to the laws of Moses they received when traveling from slavery in Egypt to the promised land.
 - a) To be clean means you can live in the camp; you can be with people. However, to be unclean means you need to be removed from society, living outside of the camp until your state of uncleanness has expired.
 - b) The reason that someone deemed unclean needs to be isolated, is that **the very state of being unclean itself is highly contagious**. If a person who is ceremonially unclean comes into contact with a person who is ceremonially clean, that clean person will also become unclean. Sometimes that person can make others unclean, who can make others unclean. So contact with people who are unclean is to be totally avoided.
 - c) **Folks are deemed unclean for a variety of reasons**. Some of these are sinful behaviors. Some of them are due to contact with various animals. And some are purely biological - a woman's monthly period, or for a woman or a man, the appearance of any kind of skin disorder, will cause one to be unclean for as long as it persists. **Eating certain foods** can make you unclean.
3. The Jews had legit reasons to think this “them” was to be held at arms length. **They’d been carefully keeping these laws for centuries**. It’s what made them distinctive as a people, even when they lost their land and were taken into exile. **Remember Daniel who was blessed by God for keeping Kosher, for honoring these sacred rules, even working in the King’s court, where it could have cost him dearly**. By Jesus time, just to go into the home of an unclean person meant to potentially expose yourself, so in practices, best just stay away.
4. Their “clean” vs “unclean” understanding shaped how they saw the world, their role in it, and the role of others.
5. Through this vision, God was showing Peter that the rules were changing. **What was unclean, God was now making clean**. God was the one who’d given them the rules in the first place; He had the authority to now show Peter and others another perspective.

C. The work of God in other people speaks for itself.

1. The vision, was just that: a vision. **It was an invitation to Peter to have a look at something he’d otherwise have dismissed outright**.
2. **But the vision alone wouldn’t have been enough** to tear down the wall of perception and theology that separated Jewish and Gentile Christians from one another. **Peter had to go**

to see what happened with Cornelius. He had to take 6 witnesses- three times the culturally necessary number to verify something for Jews of their time.

3. **They take a risk and show up**, and Peter starts to preach. But it is self-evident immediately that what is happening is bigger than Peter or Cornelius. God was in the room. Peter gets to be there, so he can see what God is doing in someone else and let his paradigms be broken open.
4. **“Who was I to stand in God’s way?” Peter asks.** This is the great question that continues to assert itself to followers of God throughout history. **Will we make space to allow God to do new things in our midst, even amongst those we consider outside our own boundaries of how God works?** And when we see God doing a new thing, are we willing to get out of the way and let him lead? Or will we step in and try to control it.
5. It’s a question the church has had to ask in regards to slaves and abolitionists saying **Jesus calls followers of God to be liberators**, despite the church’s historic understanding of texts that told slaves to submit to their masters. It’s the question that has rung out as **women have been given space to speak and lead**, to great effect, despite the church’s historic understanding of the role of women being silent in the church.
6. **My journey on the issue of LGBT. Started with an invitation.**
 - a) Many years ago as a new follower of Jesus, I found myself challenged by the lack of LGBT inclusivity I saw in the church. At the time, I felt like Jesus affirmed my questions but said, **“There aren’t good answers; can you put this on the shelf?”**
 - b) Years later, as I’m saying yes to church entrepreneurship, and yes to doing it in Berkeley, the issue was alive for me. Another invitation from Jesus, **“Let’s take this off the shelf. And pioneer something different.”**
 - c) And saying yes to those invitation helped me **make space to walk faith out with gay Christians.** Having one of my long-time pastors and mentors come out to me, and share that perhaps long-term celibacy was not something she felt God required her to commit to anymore. Praying for a lesbian friend, married to a woman with kids, and seeing her bathed in the Holy Spirit, just like Cornelius. Introducing my pastor friend Emily to her wife Rachel and getting to be there for their entire courtship, wedding, and seeing them now, over a year later. **All started with making space to see what God was doing; but his work speaks for itself.**

D. Building the family of God doesn’t mean absorbing others through assimilation into one dominant group. It means growing in distinctiveness and beauty through diverse expressions of community.

1. After the question of whether to associate with Gentiles and whether to preach to them was settled, **there were still major questions that came forward about how these new Jesus followers were to be included.**
 - a) Did they need to essentially become Jewish? Circumcised or not? Follow Jewish religious practices: keeping kosher, Jewish holidays, cleanliness rituals, Sabbath keeping, etc.
 - b) Or could they retain their cultural identity and worship Jesus from that place?
2. A few chapters later the church would sort this out at council of Jerusalem. They made an important choice that has laid the groundwork for all of us - **to not require gentile believers to become culturally Jewish.** They were **not asked to assimilate.** Rather, **the church was expected to change** to reflect a more diverse expression of Jesus-following practice.
3. This is the heart of what in Blue Ocean we call, **the “Third Way”.** Paul’s instruction to the church in Rome, found in Romans 14 and 15 is at the heart of it, that Paul is making clear

that this was how the early church was intended to function. There were multiple expressions of Jesus following taking place, and Paul encouraged them to hold the tension. **Not to quarrel over what he called “disputable matters”**. (These are not the essentials of our faith: whether Jesus came from God, lived, died, rose from the dead). On these non-essentials for faith, Paul asked them not to dominate one another. Agree to disagree. To unite with the core thing that united them, a connection to the living Jesus, the Holy Spirit alive in their midst and flowing through them. But not to separate over or suppress the things that made them distinctive.

- a) **Our conversation about race - historically the church has tried to assimilate others into its dominant form**, and this has been a very negative, pejorative, experience for our brothers and sisters of color. Rather than recognize the diverse expressions of God centered worship that are manifest in different cultures. **We’re not looking for a mono-culture**. We’re looking for a plurality of cultures that can exist in harmony.
- b) **My hope is that Haven will grow in this**: My dream is for more voices in the pulpit, not just mine: female, male, from different racial backgrounds, different orientations, different strains of Jesus-centered faith. **We get a better picture of who God is as we hear from more of the people God has made**.
- c) **Ultimately, this is the end that Scripture points to**. John, the follower of Jesus, describes a vision of the end of the story. A time when he says people from every nation, tribe, people group, and language are united in worship of Jesus. **No one voice, language, cultural expression is lifted up above another. But all of them in their own unique way communicate, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”** Somehow all in harmony painting a colorful picture of who God is and how this infinitely faceted God reflects God’s self through humanity. This is what we mean when we say “Everyone is us.” It’s that kind of us.

III. Practical Suggestions for living “Everyone is Us”.

A. Invite God to challenge your own perceptions of how God works and in whom.

- 1. What’s our version of the vision with the sheet and the animals?
- 2. What’s your version of God’s dialogue with me through the years about LGBT inclusion?
- 3. Take some time today in prayer to ask God if you have any blind spots or biases that get in the way of you holding up the work of God in others.

B. Look for opportunities to witness God at work in communities and cultures other than your own.

- 1. **Peter and his friends went and were guests in the home of Gentiles**. They became the minority, and got to experience the culture of the majority in that home. This opened up their worldview.
- 2. What’s your version? Learning through **reading, media? Elevating the voices** of others who do not share your lived experience? **Travel?** Do you have personal relationships with folks in your life that you could grow in and that would introduce you to things God may be doing that you’re unaware of? **People involved might not even call it God**, yet as we see their care for the environment, their commitment to justice, their value on parenting, etc., we discover more about human flourishing, points us to Jesus.
- 3. And yes, **of course this means other faiths**. And people of no faith. All people are created in the image of God and capable of reflecting that image. And how are we to know whom God is at work in? Jesus said, “I have other sheep not of this pen”. There’s a good chance a lot of them are outside of our churches.

- C. Participate in practical endeavors to promote the flourishing of other groups, alongside your own.**
1. Not “us” or “them”; “us” and “them”. Our group flourishing need not depend on the diminishment of others. Promote the flourishing of all.
 2. **Justice work** - recognizing we’re not all starting from the same place. “Colorblindness” or “Post-Racial” perspectives are not helpful for people of color. They only reinforce the disparities. Some folks need more in order to flourish. So help fight for them to get more.
- D. End with video - “The Mosque Across the Street”**