

**SERMON**  
**January 12, 2020**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

**Acts 10: 34**

*Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

We are only 12 days into the new year, so it’s certainly not too late to make some resolutions, to reexamine where we’ve been and where we hope to be going. We’ve got some new challenges that include turning the Conboy Center into a parish hall and education center—and getting ready for the future of this congregation. Who knows how it will evolve. We’ve got a different sort of financial picture to figure out—new priorities, and new financial freedoms. We need to ask new questions and be open to new ways of being Epiphany Church. We’ve come this far! It’s 2020! Another way of saying this is—“We need to know what chapter we are in,” because, as I hear myself say, over and over, to many different people, “If you’re trying to live in the wrong chapter, it just won’t work out the way you hope.” I’ve seen it too many times—When people try to live in an earlier chapter, for reasons of fear or sentimentality, it confuses everyone. It doesn’t make much sense. It’s out of touch. And, there’s a deadness about it. It’s hard to get something started. There’s just no verve to it. It falls flat. There’s no “life” in it. We all need to know what chapter we are in.

Our lives are like chapter books. Each chapter is related to the one before. Our lives are not just a collection of unrelated essays—but each chapter is different. There are new circumstances, new characters, new developments. New insights. It’s a page-turner, really. Jim Conboy and I were having this conversation this week—remembering past chapters here at Epiphany. He’s got many more chapters than I do. But what we realized, is that the chapters seem to be identifiable, best described, by the people who are in them with us. People matter. New chapters are shaped by new people who bring new perspectives. Everyone matters. It’s the people who make the story.

This past week I was invited to do a burial service at Arlington Cemetery. The service was for my dear friend and neighbor, Sandy. Sandy is part of the McCain family, the daughter and

granddaughter of Admirals, and the sister of the late John McCain. Sandy was a friend for over twenty years. I have met her children and other family members over the years, but at the reception following the service, I met someone new (to me anyway), John Donoghue. Actually his name is John Joseph Donoghue with a bunch of other names in between—like all good Irish Catholics. Maybe he said his name is John Joseph Francis, Ignatius, Andrew...I can't remember them all. Donoghue worked for Senator McCain for 32 years, working his way from the mail room to the role of Chief of Staff. Starting at 18, he is now a 50-year old man. He worked two presidential campaigns, helped write legislation, and recently, was a de facto counselor for a staff working through their grief after the Senator died. He seemed a bit lost so we struck up a conversation.

“That was a long and exciting chapter you just lived,” I said. “You must be exhausted. So what’s your next chapter about?”

“I don’t know,” he answered.

“Well, what were some of your other chapters about?”

He looked surprised.

“I wanted to be an actor. My mother said I was pretty good at it.”

“I bet you were! Not everybody knows how to get the curtain up! Most don’t. Maybe 5%. I’d say you’ve been responsible for getting the show on the stage for a lot of years. And did it well.”

John Joseph... et. cetera, was obviously interested in what he hadn’t thought about for a long time—his own *through line*. He hadn’t considered the chapter idea or the prior connections leading up to that chapter. I noticed that he seemed to relax and said something about trying to *find his way forward*. Actually, what he probably got a glimpse of, was his *through line*—the existence of a *through line* in his life. The *through line* is like a thread that winds or a rope that

pulls together the many chapters of our lives. A *through line* is a theatrical or literary term. It is sometimes called the spine of the story.

It was first suggested by Konstantin Stanislavski, the father of the modern *theater of realism*, as a simplified way for actors to think about characterization—who they are in the story. You can attach all the elements that are part of the character you are building to the *through line*, even when that story is your life. A *through line* is more than a theme, or idea—it is the action or actions that build the story. The theme of the story might be made up of a particular value or values, but the *through line* is how you live out or solve those values.

A story or life theme might be “to make the world a better place” or “to change a world view.” But, its *through line* might be—unlocking empathy, stirring excitement, sharing knowledge and insights, or promoting a shared dream. Every life, whether it is examined or not, probably has a *through line*. The smart thing is to become aware! Intentional. To embark on the journey in a conscious way. Awareness makes it possible to be more discerning about the shape of your life. Same story. But with a different chapter. A piece of the whole. But with different actions. More integrity and strength. Probably a lot clearer, and maybe more exciting. Mr. Donoghue noticeably “perked up.” I could see the wheels starting to spin.

The passage from the Book of Acts today, Peter’s confession, is about the most exciting *through line* I’ve found in the story of the Christian Church. It is, therefore, our *through line*. It provides an opportunity for us to discern the shape of our lives as followers of Christ—for those who want to know what it means to be faithful here and now. Peter’s *through line* helps us to make sense of the actions and decisions in our lives no matter what chapter, or what century, or what nation or what culture we live in. It is all revealed in the conversation Peter has with Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. The *through line* is about boundaries and borders, what it means to be clean and unclean, what it means to be righteous and unrighteous, who is part of God’s kingdom, who will be the people of this story. Who’s in and who’s out. This might be the theme because it’s a conversation, an argument really, that has been going on, it seems, forever.

Here's what happens: Cornelius, a Gentile and soldier of the Roman army was a devout man who feared God. One afternoon, Cornelius sees an angel of God who tells him to send for Peter, someone he has never seen or met. The next day, Peter, a devout Jew and apostle of Jesus Christ has a vision during prayer in which unclean meat is provided for him to eat. Peter denies the invitation from Cornelius on the basis of his religion saying, "I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." In response, a voice says to Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happens three times. Soon, the men that Cornelius sends for Peter, find him and explain Cornelius' vision. Together, they go back to Cornelius' home and the Peter finds himself in the unclean living room of a soldier from the evil empire. Peter is all sorts of out-of-bounds! But something has changed. He sees and understands this new chapter he is in, differently now. Peter explains,

*"You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."*

The boundaries that Peter thought he knew are radically redefined. The spirit of God is on the move, breaking boundaries, crossing borders, erasing categories, and reconciling all the world to God. Peter gets it! He understands! He says,

*"Now I understand that God has no favorites" and that "everyone who believes in Jesus, the Lord of all, receives forgiveness."*

Peter sees the *through line*—the connecting actions of Jesus: Jesus' baptism; his anointing; his ministry; his acts of healing; and his doing good. He was killed on a tree. God raised him. He appeared to those who chosen to be witnesses who ate and drank with him.

For Peter, the actions are cohesive and comprehensive. Peter understands. Buys in. All or nothing. It makes sense. He now knows what he is supposed to do—to find new ways to include everyone in God's kingdom. To be a Jesus man, reaching out, healing, doing good, being fully present for others. Peter, and now Cornelius, become part of the story.

Like John Joseph Francis, Ignatius, Andrew—what will be the new name for our new chapter? The test of this passage is whether or not it answers the question about what we are to do in order to be faithful “Jesus People. Does it give us something wondrous inside, an “ah-ha,” and “epiphany” that can lead us forward? Does it help us connect all the pieces and discern what we are to do, in our time, our circumstances, our chapters?

The theme? “To please God.” The through line? “To do what God would have us do.” To discover the *through line* for us now, in our current chapters.

May we always be open. May we always be open to new friends. May we always look for new ways to live in witness to God’s expansive love. May we be clear and deliberate, loving and courageous. May we be faithful “Jesus People.” For God has no favorites, but offers forgiveness and inclusion, and new life for all.

Amen.