

God's Y'All

A Confirmation Sunday Sermon on Acts 2:42-47—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
May 7, 2017—The First United Church of Christ (Congregational), Milford, CT

1.

Dylan, Brynn, Dan, Jason, Matt, Gavin, Dana, Dylan, and Nick: I am so glad you all are being confirmed today, and especially that Dana, who had major surgery four weeks ago, is here, so that it's truly you all.

Ye is a Middle English way, Yous Guys is the Brooklyn way, Yinz is the western Pennsylvania way, but to me the most fun way to articulate second person plural in English is the southern way: y'all. And not just because I'm married to a southerner and lived in Texas. Y'all is a beautiful contraction that identifies who you're referring to—you plural. Y'all is versatile, too. You can use the word when speaking to one person about a group to which the person belongs: "Oh Donnie, how y'all been? I haven't seen your parents in a long time!" There's the most common usage, when speaking to multiple people and referring to them all: "Y'all come back now, y'hear?" And then when you want to make sure that absolutely everyone feels included in what you're saying, there's "all y'all," as in: "All y'all are welcome to the reception after worship. In case you were wondering, everyone is invited."

Today's reading is a significant moment in the Christian biblical history of God's and the people's y'all.

The Bible is a social document, intended not for an individual but for a community and potentially all God's people. Unfortunately some of the Bible's social implications get lost in translation from Hebrew and Greek. For example, when Paul's words are translated, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" it makes it sound like he's speaking to one person, second person singular, that an individual's body is a

temple. Although I think that that's one legitimate interpretation, what Paul literally meant was second person plural, y'all's body, you all as members of the body of Christ, your community is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

2.

The Bible focuses on God's y'all from start to its finish:

In the beginning, God creates two people—Adam and Eve—to be the beginning and end all of God's people, God's y'all. But then the serpent and the fruit open their eyes to their own power (and to being nekkid), and God makes them mortal and banishes them from the garden of Eden, saying, "Y'all do NOT come back now, y'hear?"

God tries again with another pair, Sarah and Abraham. The y'all expands, until the Israelites who have moved to Egypt scare Pharaoh by their vast numbers. So Pharaoh has them enslaved and tries to kill their babies. God's y'all is threatened. So God intervenes through Moses to save God's y'all out of Egypt, then establishes the ten y'alls: Y'all don't murder; Y'all don't steal. Y'all have no other gods before me, because I am y'all's God and y'all are my people: God's y'all.

God's y'all in Israel rises up but then starts to fall apart as Saul, David and Solomon fail to live up to God's commands. The kingdoms are conquered, some Israelites are exiled, tearing apart God's y'all. A hope grows that a Son of David will arrive to restore the golden age of God's y'all in Israel.

Jesus shows up and says, "Y'all, the kingdom of God is coming!" He chooses twelve disciples who don't all get along, and implies, "Y'all are a symbol of God's kingdom." The greatest Jewish law? someone asks Jesus: "Love y'all's God with all your

heart and soul, love y'all's neighbor as y'all love yourself." Jesus' example of neighbor is a Samaritan, the most hated of the Jews' ethnic adversaries, to say, your neighbor is all people. He tells the story of a shepherd who retrieves the one lost sheep to restore the 100 of his fold back together. 'Cuz God's y'all is all y'all.

But the powerful feel threatened by Jesus' message of God's y'all. They want to keep God's y'all divided and under their oppression. So they get Jesus executed. Which works, for about two days. Then Easter and the empty tomb happens, he starts appearing to them all.

Before the risen Christ ascends to heaven, he tells the disciples to make disciples from all the nations, to spread the Good News in Jerusalem, In Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth [Acts 1:8]. Earlier in today's chapter, Acts 2, the Christian event of Pentecost happens, the flames of fire of the Holy Spirit enable the disciples to speak in all different languages, Peter quotes the prophet Joel who quotes God saying "I will pour out my Spirit on all humankind"—all y'all! Peter proclaims that Jesus is singled out by God to offer forgiveness and the Holy Spirit "to you and to your children and to all who are far away, to everyone whom the Lord...may call" [Acts 2:17 f]. Lots of people decide to follow Jesus, the one who lives, dies, and rises for God's y'all.

3.

This brings us to today's reading. After Pentecost, this new collection of long-time and new followers of the risen Christ have to figure out who they are and what they are doing. What does it mean to follow Christ? What do they do on a daily basis? How are they to be God's y'all in their daily lives?

Acts tells us this:

This new expression of God's y'all meets constantly.

They listen to the apostles preach.

They share a common life.

They eat together.

They pray together.

They experience awe together.

They even agree to share their stuff together, selling off stuff and distributing to everyone according to their need.

And day by day more people join them in the movement that brings joy to those follow Jesus because they experience daily that they are being God's y'all, not individuals on their separate journeys but on a shared journey of faith in the one God of all.

4.

We live in a society today where people are often applauded for their rugged individualism, where the world rewards those who look out for number one. And much of that can be good: responsibility and self-sufficiency makes it possible for much of the world to operate. It's crucial that a large part of the world can take care of themselves and feel productive, especially apart from forces that harm or dehumanize them.

But we don't live in isolation, we rely on each other. When everybody lives and works just for oneself it leaves isolated those who can't care for themselves. It also leaves those who succeed and who do get by in a place of isolation, feeling cut off from a sense of collective identity, of greater meaning, of purpose that transcends self-centered motives.

God didn't just create the world, God also created y'all-ness, the joy of human community. There is joy in being part of God's y'all, that reflects what I believe is God's own y'all-ness, the Trinity: God three-in-one. God is a y'all. And we were created as part of a wholeness of creation, in order to participate in that creation as members of the full

body. Whether we are able-bodied or not, whether we are infant, toddler, child, adolescent, adult or elderly, we belong to God's y'all. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're part of God's y'all.

Living in God's y'allness inevitably leads to sharing with one another. Shane Claiborne writes: The early Christians did not have community because they shared stuff — just the opposite. They shared stuff because they had community. It is simply what happens when we are driven by a love ethic to love our neighbor as ourselves.ⁱ God's y'all shares because that's what you do when you grow into a community of God's y'all. You love, you trust, and this leads to sharing. God and a community builds a y'all together and they reinforce that y'all.

The danger of a y'all is that it quickly solidifies into an us that then identifies outsiders as thems, it turns its y'all into an exclusive group with barriers and fortresses and litmus tests that do a bunch of gatekeeping. Theologian Serene Jones likes to say that groups must have some sort of shared identity to defines their boundaries but that the Christian faith is called to have less of a tall barrier and more of a shrubbery around it with wide openings that allow those who are outside to know that they are welcome and to make it safe for those outside it to not feel caged in.ⁱⁱ

Because we are all God's y'all, and the church at its best is that people who respond to the call to make God's y'all more and more of a reality. God's y'all is everybody; it's a beautiful y'all; it's huge.

But it takes intentional time together live out being part of God's y'all. It takes making the inbreaking of God's y'all a priority. It means being willing to tolerate people who are different than you and to deal with setbacks in trust and community when people don't fulfill what God calls them to do.

It means gathering in pews together for worship, gathering at the table for Holy Communion, and gathering around tables for discernment and the breaking of bread. It takes being willing to experience awe as a group, to see how God is working in the world and through God's y'all. It takes a receptiveness for joy, to see God's y'all all around us, and among us. Like all those kids who have helped put bags together for food insecure students in Milford Public Schools.

5.

Confirmation class of 2017: Y'all have experienced the cost and joys of participating in God's y'all. Dylan, Dylan, Brynn, Dan, Dana, Gavin, Nick, Matt and Jason, you've participated in the y'all of the confirmation ministry, as we sat around tables and considered the costs and joys of discipleship, as we reflected on the story of the Bible and how we continue that story day by day in our lives, making decisions that bring God's kingdom closer or further from here. We joined in ministries of sharing the story of God's love and community in Sunday School where those kids need to hear it, of sharing welcoming people as people who needed that welcome entered into worship. Y'all have shared the food and fellowship at coffee hour that people needed to connect after worship. And Dana shared her story with people who need hope and faith. Y'all are talented in sharing with others what they need. You are members of God's beautiful, joyful y'all.

When Shane Claiborne was ministering with the homeless in India, he and his colleagues would throw a party each week with the street kids, kids around 8 to 10 years old who were homeless and begged to get money to survive. One week it was close to the birthday of a kid, so Shane got the boy an ice cream. "He was so excited, he stared at it mesmerized. But what he did next was brilliant. He yelled at all the other kids and told them to come

over. He lined them up and gave them all a lick.”
The boy’s response to the gift was, “This is so good, I can’t keep it for myself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We are God’s y’all through Jesus Christ. We can’t keep it to ourselves because that’s not what the Good News is. We are God’s community, and what community does is transform us into God’s sharing people.

Today in the laying on of hands, we re-enact the giving of the Spirit that God has already given to you, and we invite you to participate and serve communion to represent your sharing of God’s love

ⁱ Shane Claiborne, “A Radical Redistribution of Love,” *Sojourners Magazine*, <https://sojo.net/articles/radical-redistribution-love>

ⁱⁱ From Jones and Volf’s Systematic Theology course, spring 2001, Yale Divinity School.

to God’s y’all in the world, so that your ministry may break down barriers between in here and out there.

Today is not graduation (y’all come back now, y’hear?)! Today instead is the moment, the opportunity to move forward as God’s faithful for the rest of your adult lives, growing day by day, yes as individuals, but more importantly as members of communities of faith, sharing your time, talent, and treasure, and sharing in the treasure of being members of God’s beloved y’all. Amen.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shane Claiborne, “A Radical Redistribution of Love,” *Sojourners Magazine*, <https://sojo.net/articles/radical-redistribution-love>