

Narrative Lectionary: Peter's Vision

April 22, 2018

So we are now in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Last week, Saul the persecutor of Christians met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. His name is changed to Paul, and he becomes the main instrument for the Holy Spirit in the second half of the book. Let me see how much you remember about some of the followers of Jesus who star in the first part of the Book of Acts. Which disciple denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed? (Peter) After the resurrection, Jesus asked this disciple three times, Do you love me? (Peter) This apostle preached a sermon after which 3,000 people were baptized (Peter)

OK, be careful now...This apostle shared Christ with a eunuch from Ethiopia (Philip). In the Book of Acts, the good news of Jesus is going to keep reaching people further and further out of the circle, like this sexually-marginalized person whom Philip was told to go visit. According to the Law of Moses, this man from Ethiopia, a high-powered official, wasn't allowed in the temple when he had visited Jerusalem because he was a eunuch. But Philip is told to take the good news to him. In Acts, people on the margins will be drawn into the kingdom.

Jesus said to his followers at the beginning of Acts, You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Those concentric circles extend out to people the Jewish people weren't supposed to associate with. This continues in today's story.

God sends Peter to a town called Joppa along the seacoast because a woman named Dorcas has died. She was a seamstress in the Christian community and was known for her acts of charity. It's why some churches have a Dorcas Circle, often women who work with fabric and donate their works to good causes. Our Peace by Piece quilters are a great example of a fabric ministry like Dorcas had in the Book of Acts.

After Peter restores Dorcas to the community, he stays in the town of Joppa with a tanner, a man named Simon. Tanning was an unclean profession among the Jews, so God is already pushing Peter's boundaries. The Holy Spirit is preparing Peter to go even further beyond the boundaries.

That's where our story picks up for today. Cornelius is a Roman military officer in Caesarea, about 30 miles north of Joppa. Caesarea was an administrative capital of the Roman province of Judea, a site for gladiator games and theater in a beautiful amphitheater overlooking the Mediterranean. Cornelius is a devout man who fears God. We'd call him spiritual but not religious. He probably believes in the God of Israel, but he isn't circumcised. He believes in God but isn't connected to institutional religion. He prays. He gives to people in need. But he's a Gentile, he's a non-Jew, and Jews aren't supposed to have anything to do with a guy like Cornelius. The Holy Spirit has other plans.

On this particular day he is praying at about 3pm, and an angel appears in a vision and says, Cornelius, God has heard your prayers and seen your almsgiving. Send some of your servants over to Joppa to fetch a man named Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner.

So Cornelius sends two slaves and a soldier to fetch Peter in Joppa. Meanwhile, Peter goes up on the roof to pray, and has a vision. (Remember that the roofs were flat; he wasn't hanging onto the chimney!) A sheet falls down from heaven with all kinds of animals and seafood and birds on it, and they are unclean according to Leviticus, unclean according to what observant Jews can eat and not eat. This is an awful vision for a Jew to see. But a voice says, Get up, Peter, kill and eat.

And Peter says, No way, Lord! I've never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. Right answer, according to the Mosaic Law. But the voice issues a counter-response: What God has made clean, you must not call profane. This happens not once, but three times, like Peter really needs to hear this. Each time, Peter says, No way, Lord, and the voice says, What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Peter is puzzled by the vision. But he is soon going to realize that this is not about food, it's about people. Because right after this vision, there is a knock on the door, and lo and behold, three Gentiles are standing there. They tell their story to Peter about their master Cornelius having a vision, and Peter says, Come on in and spend the night. After all, he keeps remembering that voice saying, What God has called clean, you must not call profane. So Peter looks at these Gentiles at the door, and he says, I've never done this before, but come on in.

But I wonder if there isn't an argument going on in Peter's mind. I wonder if Peter as a church leader is thinking, Where is the line going to be, God? You're asking me to accept *these* people? What understanding of Scripture are you going to change next? It used to be just black and white. These people were in, these people were out. My guess is he didn't sleep very well that night. The boundaries he thought were solid were getting stretched.

So he walks several days to Caesarea with some of the believers and these three Gentiles, and I'm sure some other questions were crowding into his mind. How am I going to explain this to church headquarters back in Jerusalem? Don't we have any standards anymore? How will we Jews keep our identity if we let Gentiles in? How can I be a leader in the Church if I don't know what's going on, if God keeps changing the rules?

Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, and knocks on the door, and Cornelius answers. He's asked all his relatives and close friends to come. And when he sees Peter, he falls at his feet and begins to worship him. Peter says, Stand up; I'm only a mortal. And as he walks into the room, and sees all these Gentiles gathered, people a good Jew is not supposed to associate with, he says, 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*. Now why did you send for me?

Let me tell you a story about somebody's mind that was changed that had to do with who might be profane or unclean. My friend Pastor Scott Dunfee at St. Stephen in Gladstone was a pastor in the Bay Area in the 1990s. This was before ELCA congregations could call a gay or lesbian pastor. Several congregations in San Francisco were calling a gay and a lesbian pastor, and the Northern California Synod and national church were saying, You can't do this. Pastor Scott was on the consultation committee for the synod, and was asked to meet with the bishop and these church leaders to see if they could come to some sort of reconciliation. They had met that day, and they were at loggerheads.

And Pastor Scott wasn't even sure where he stood on the issue. He was there to see if they could talk with each other. Pastor Scott was now on his way home. He had been leading his people through a Bible study in Acts, and was going to talk about this story of Peter and Cornelius that night. As he went through the tunnel on his way back home, he was fervently praying that God would give him a sign.

The tunnel was dark, and as he came out into the bright sunshine, Peter's words from this story rang out clearly in his mind: What God has made clean, you must not call profane. That was the clarity that Pastor Scott needed. God had shown him a wider dimension of God's grace. I share Pastor Scott's welcome and acceptance of LGBT folks as well.

I also really connect with the way Peter shares this vision. Do you notice what he says? God has shown *me* that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. I'm not telling you what you need to believe, but God has shown *me*.

Cornelius tells Peter about his vision. And then he says, We're all here to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say. The first thing Peter says is a radically open theological statement. "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." That's a radically accepting statement, isn't it? I'm reminded of Paul, who wonders about people who have never heard the good news of Jesus. How will they be judged? Paul says in Romans 2 that what the law requires is written on their hearts, and Jesus will judge according to what they did with that law written on their hearts. (Romans 2: 14-16) "In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

But Peter doesn't stop there. He keeps preaching. He tells the story of Jesus, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. He's just building up a head of steam, when his sermon is interrupted by the Holy Spirit. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit falls on these Gentiles, and they begin to speak in heavenly tongues and to praise God. And the believers who had come with Peter can't believe that the Spirit is falling *even on these Gentiles*.

This is a story that says, The Holy Spirit blows like the wind, and you can't predict where it's going to blow. I believe our job as a people of faith is to assume that the Spirit is out working in our community and when God calls us to, we can partner wherever the Spirit is. Peter realizes this, and says, Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? Peter is realizing that God is not forming some generic, uniform community, where everybody is the same. God is calling together a wildly diverse and widely inclusive community, teeming with difference. (Eric Barreto)

Now, it takes a while for the church to be ok with this. The church leaders in Jerusalem want an explanation for what is going on, and so Peter tells them the story. They are still talking about it in chapter 15 at an all-church conference.

And as the apostles discovered, God wasn't going to merge all the differences; God was going to welcome diversity into the community. The footprint of the Church was going to get larger. Here's the takeaway for me in this story. When we try to tighten the circle, God finds ways to enlarge it. And the Spirit is always ahead of us. That's what happens in Acts. We have this sense that the apostles are bringing the message of Jesus to people. But what they keep discovering is that the Spirit has gone ahead of them and is working in people's lives, and their job is to show up, and share their story of Jesus, and see what God wants to do.

Notice how Peter is changed in this story. Peter hears the voice of God saying, What God has called clean, you must not call profane. He knows this intellectually, because God has told him this. But do you notice how this moves from his head to his heart? As he begins to live it out, as he invites these outsiders into his home, and even more so as he walks into the home of Cornelius, as he sees his customs, and eats his food, and listens to his beliefs and his passions and his loves, as he is introduced to his spouse and hears his children laugh. His whole concept of the other begins to change as he befriends him.

Jesus calls us to befriend the "other", those who are different denominationally, religiously, sexually, culturally, racially, economically, ideologically, politically.

Let me close with a story about reaching out to "the other." Out at the NORCOR jail in The Dalles, ICE is using the jail to detain immigrants who have come to this country illegally. They are not being held for criminal charges, but for civil ones, because they are undocumented. And they are not being allowed to see family at all. I read a story recently about a man named Jorge, who has been in detention for two years. He hasn't seen his kids, who are US citizens, for two years. He told a pastor who visited him, "I cannot be deported because I cannot live apart from my family. They depend on me and the money I make for the family working cherries, apples, and pears. I cannot make this kind of money in Mexico."

He told the pastor that before ICE took him, he and his daughter Laura had a disagreement. He wasn't able to reconcile with her before he was arrested, and it bothers him greatly. The other night he had a dream that he said God gave him. The family was playing soccer together, and he and his daughter got tripped up, and as they were looking at each other, they began laughing and laughing. When he woke up, he had a strong feeling of peace about his relationship with Laura. He telephoned her, and they cried together over the phone. But they cannot reconcile with a hug.

No matter where you stand on what to do about immigrants coming to this country illegally, it doesn't seem just or fair that those in this detention center cannot see their families. I just signed a petition asking for a change in this policy. It's in the narthex this morning if you'd like to sign it as well.

Let me tell you something from my own life: when I dare to move across a barrier, when I get involved with people who have a different story from me, what I discover is that the Spirit is already there, and I am changed in the encounter. Let us pray.

God of all people, I wonder what barrier you might have us cross this week? I wonder how you might want us to expand the circle, and include others whom you have created? So give us the courage and wisdom to take a risk for the sake of our neighbor, especially our neighbor on the margins. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.