

Our readings from Scripture this week are so rich, I hardly know where to begin. As I reflected on our reading from Acts, I was struck by the power of Peter's story. Luke, the author of Acts, must have been struck by that too, because he recounts Peter's story more than once, just like he tells Paul's story that we heard a few weeks ago more than once. Of central importance in the Book of Acts is how God's saving embrace through Jesus Christ was extended to the whole world - to the gentiles - and was not limited to just God's chosen people. And we learn of this through the power of the stories.

As modern people, we might be a little suspicious of folks who have visions and who then tell us about them. We tend to wonder if such people are a little touched in the head. As one of Lily Tomlin's characters questions in the play *In Search of Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*: "Why is it that when I talk to God, its called prayer, but if I say God talks back, its called crazy?" Acts does not say that Saul was crazy and suffered from an aural hallucination or that Ananias who restored Saul's sight was crazy for responding to and interacting with Jesus during a vision. Nor does it think it is particularly out of the ordinary that Peter has a vision that finds him responsive to what Jesus asks of him. These experiences,

together, sealed the deal to extend the Good News to the Gentiles with the early Christian leadership in Jerusalem.

Who were those early Christian leaders? Tradition has it that James, Jesus' brother was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He would have known as well as any that during Jesus' earthly life, Jesus himself understood his mission to be primarily to the Jews. As part of the Pharistical sect, the church in Jerusalem would have been faithful and observant Jews - think of our Orthodox Jewish friends. To them, Peter - Peter of all people! mingling and eating with those who are unclean and eating unclean things was beyond unthinkable.

To give you a sense of the level of revulsion these faithful people felt, think of the revulsion our brothers and sisters in the developing world feel to those in same gender relationships. And there are many in the west and right here in Southern Maryland who also are revolted at the very idea of same gender relationships. They point to verses in Scripture that condemn these relationships. Making a theological or intellectual argument for same gender relationships will always be unsuccessful to an emotional response at the level of revulsion or in the violation of a taboo.

What bridges the divide between advocates for a change and those who seek to conserve the status quo are stories; stories that show that God is present and at work in those lives. For some, these stories may be how they have lived their lives and the real, tangible results of how they have touched other lives in a positive way. It becomes obvious how God is at work in those lives, so obvious that one can begin to consider getting over the revulsion or revising thoughts on what is taboo. For others, these stories may be deeply personal ones that reveal how God has touched them or how they have seen God at work. It could even be in a vision or actually hearing the voice of God. Even for us, today. I stand here before you to tell you that Jesus has talked to me and I have had a powerful vision some 20 years ago that sustains me and my faith even to this day. If your curious, ask me about it and I'm happy to tell you. And I know I'm not crazy because before I was ordained, a psyciatrist certified me "not crazy."

The leaders in Jerusalem were able to get passed their revulsion when they realized that Peter didn't initiate the vision and that Peter didn't initate the visit to the gentile family. That was clearly the work of the Spirit. Through Peter's story, they could let his comment sink in that the Holy Spirit told him to "make not a distinction between them and us." (v 12)

They could understand that “if the God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (v 17) Who were they to hinder God? Indeed, who are we to hinder God? At first, the leaders were silent and as their “a-ha!” moment broke in they rejoiced for “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!” (v 18) And that’s good news for all of us.

There’s more good news in this story. Enshrined in our scripture, in our foundational stories, is that our understanding of what it is to please God can be culturally adapted. The Good News in Christ can be culturally adapted. From our perspective, God is always surprising us. As much as we want to exclude, God includes. Peter notes that the Spirit tells him to make not a distinction between them and us. Paul phrases it “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Now some of you might be squirming in your seats. Surely not everything is adaptable? Surely the Gospel is not endlessly adaptable? And you would be right. Within our passage from Acts, we see pointers to

what is changeless: speaking the name of Jesus, bearing witness to his resurrection and acknowledging the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

We also see in Acts that right from the beginning the followers of the Way had profound disagreements on who should hear the Good News in Christ. They also profoundly disagreed on the nature of Christ that took 500 years to mostly resolve. Disagreements have characterized the defining moments in the life of the Church, east versus west, Catholic versus Protestant and so on. Where divides have been bridged, is where all parties agree to be in conversation, to witness to one another stories of how God is at work in our lives. It matters, it is critically important when we have any kind of controversy that we tell one another our own story, how we have experienced God and how God has empowered us to do God's will.

Avoiding a conflict is only a useful tactic when the stakes are low. As uncomfortable as times of conflict and change are, staying engaged is a gift and an act of faith. In our Gospel passage Jesus tells us the deceptively simple way to do this: love one another. It's deceptively simple because this is anything but simple. Judas has just left the gathering at the last

---

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Mudge, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C*, David L Barrett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 454.

supper to betray Jesus. Jesus knows he's on the way to the cross. He knows that his death will cause turmoil and disarray among even his closest followers. He knows that fear will be ever present. So he offers them the antidote. Love one another as I have loved you. And if you do, he tells them, people will know you are my disciples. Loving as Jesus loved gets talked about. Stories will circulate. It attracts people.

In this last week, I have heard some wonderful stories about this parish. Stories that tell of how love is right at the heart of all we do. Stories that recount how we, small in number, have touched at least 12,000 lives in the last year alone. I've heard a vision on how we can continue to nurture and sustain lives in Jesus name. To which I can only add my amen. In the right moment, be fearless and tell one another where you see God at work. Tell one another where you feel empowered to work on God's behalf. And listen with not just your ears, listen with your heart also. One very wise person observed that not one of us knows what the future will bring, not one of us has the sure fire answer to our continued viability. But what I know for sure, as Oprah would say, is that together, engaged, listening, telling our stories, we will figure it out with God's help.

AMEN