

Acts 10:34-43 Pastor Bill Uetricht Baptism of our Lord

What we know about many people is that they learn best by experience. Many people do their best reflection after they have experienced something. Peter in our second lesson for today is reflecting; he is proclaiming after he has experienced something big.

In the previous chapter, Peter had an experience with Cornelius, a Roman soldier, a Gentile, i.e., not one of our club. By Jewish law, Peter is not supposed to be associating with him, but God disrupts this assumption with a vision that Peter experiences while he is up on the roof of his house. In that vision, Peter saw the heavens open up, and something like a large sheet come down out of the heavens, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. Within this sheet are all kinds of animals, some of which Peter as a good Jew could not eat. These animals were thought to be ritually unclean by Jews.

A voice then spoke to Peter. “Get up and eat these animals, Peter!” “Oh, God forbid,” Peter says. “I as a good Jew have never eaten these kinds of animals, and I won’t eat them. It’s against my religion.” And a voice says to him, “It’s a new day. Your religion is changing. What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And just to make sure that Peter got the message, this little dream happened three times.

Religious people and others who observe religion think that religion is about that which never changes. And while I think that religion by its nature has a traditional character to it, since it is often rooted in some kind of experience in the past, I would argue that religion at its best is not about changelessness. If the Bible is any indication, the faith that we inherit, rooted in Jewish thought and practice, is forever evolving. At one point in the Bible, you didn’t eat ham sandwiches, and now in Acts you do. A new experience brings new understandings and sometimes new practices.

Now the experience that Peter had, while appearing to be about animals and what you can eat and what you can’t, more fundamentally

was about people—to whom you can relate and to whom you can't; who's a part of the club and who isn't. Cornelius, a Gentile, was told to seek Peter, a Jew. After Peter has his dream, Cornelius' people show up at Peter's doorstep. They want to connect Cornelius to Peter because Cornelius is sensing a deep call to the Jesus' movement. Peter, because of his experience with his dream, can't resist the invitation. Even though his past religious injunction would prohibit him from mingling with Cornelius, he now must rub elbows with him.

And so, Peter meets with Cornelius and his whole household, sharing the faith with them. In some ways, this sharing is initially a matter of reflecting on his experience. Listen to how he starts out what really becomes a sermon: "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."

No partiality. None. None whatsoever! It isn't about your ethnic origin, your national origin. It isn't about the color of your skin. It isn't about your past, what you've done or what you haven't. It isn't about your religious affiliation, your label. It isn't about whether you come from an urban area, a suburban area, a rural area. It isn't about your education level. It isn't about what disabilities you do or don't have. You see, Jesus is Lord of all, Peter says, not just some. He brings peace to all.

That word "peace" is very interesting. It's the word that shows up in Luke's gospel when the angels show up singing to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace* among those whom he favors." Messengers would be sent during the Roman Empire to report the latest activities or happenings with the Emperor. "Peace, peace," they might say. "The Emperor has won the war." The mighty emperor with all kinds of weapons at his side maintained peace, the kind of peace that domination brings. Well, Jesus, the one who is said to be "Lord of all," brings a different kind of peace. He brings shalom, true peace, peace that is not based on domination, peace that makes people whole—all people, for he is Lord of all.

No favorites. Life is not about hanging on to your little world, defending your little world, keeping it unpolluted from other people, their ways, their labels. To know the expansive lordship of Jesus is to open yourselves up to a marvelously diverse and fascinating world. Later in the book of Acts, Paul, in addressing the people at Athens, utilizes *their* poets to make his point—yes, a point that was somewhat critical of the Athenians. He didn't run from the great thinkers of Greece. He embraced some of their thought. He utilized it for the sake of his arguments. Israel mustn't have always run from the contributions of their neighbors either. The Psalm that we sang today, Psalm 29, was probably in its origins a Canaanite (a foreign) song, singing of the glory of their god. Israel borrowed it, and made a new song out of it.

We Christians won't do our best work if we think that we can only stay within the confines of our little club. We have much to learn and receive from others. We cannot say we will only listen to Christian music, watch Christian movies, hang out with Christian people. We need to be listening to the songs that are being sung by all kinds of folks through all kinds of styles. We need to hear the questions that are being asked in that music and in other expressions in the culture.

I saw two so-called "secular" movies this past week—"Fences" and Manchester by the Sea"—that got at what we call "sin" much better than many Christian films often do. We're going to be surprised sometimes where God shows up, as Peter was deeply surprised in his experience with Cornelius.

The experience with Cornelius. Then the reflection, the proclamation: God shows no partiality. Jesus is Lord of all, which then leads Peter to tell the Jesus story. It's not as if we do not have a story to tell to the world. We do. It's the story of Jesus: how God baptized him and covered him with the very energy, breath, and power of God, the Holy Spirit. This is to say that what Jesus was up to is what God is up to. Jesus is God's son, we are told in Matthew. That is, he represents the father. He is doing the father's work. And the work that he did was

good. His work at welcoming the outcast, proclaiming good news to the poor, healing the broken-hearted and the diseased, setting free from the bondage-producing work of the devil, was what God wanted from him and from all of us. But some folks didn't receive that good work. For some odd reason, known only to human beings, who don't quite what to do with love, they put him to death, hung him on a tree, that is, humiliated him.

But God didn't let that be the last word. God raised him on the third day, vindicating him and what he was up to. He appeared, Peter proclaims, to a small group of folks, eating and drinking with them, and also commanding us to tell his story to all, testifying that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

Wow! Part of the story that we have to tell the world is that the raised Jesus gets to speak the final word. Oh, I thought it was what I did, what you did. I thought it was about my getting it all right, you getting it all right. No, the one who gets to speak the final word, the one who is judge of the living and the dead, is the one who welcomed the outcasts, the one who as Matthew tells us today is righteous because he identified with sinners, the one who forgives sinners. Actually, Peter in the end of his sermon today in Acts says that the prophets of old testify about him that to receive him is to receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

That word "forgiveness" is quite fascinating. It comes from a Greek verb that means "release" or "let go." What we who tell the story of Jesus get to proclaim to people, all people, is that faith in him and most particularly in his God, is about release from that which holds us captive, that which prevents us from going forward, that which we use an excuse for not changing, not becoming new. What we meet in Jesus is that which frees us from our excuses. "Oh, I can't become any different. You don't know what I've been through. You don't know what I've done. I'm tied to my past. I'm tied to what people did to me. I'm in bondage to what I've done to myself and to the world." Sorry, you are not. Let it go. Get on with it. To meet and trust the one who is

the Lord of the living and the dead is to meet the power that frees us from the confines of the past. It is to experience the heavens being opened up and seeing the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting you up, reminding you that who you are at your depths is a loved child of God, with whom God takes delight. That identity is much larger than anything done to you or by you.

Live with that experience for a little while. Reflect on it. Proclaim it—humbly, please. And then invite others—others of all kinds—into the great story of Jesus. After all, he is Lord of *all*.