

Let me tell you a story. I grew up in southern Ohio—Cincinnati to be exact. I remember thinking when I was young that the problem people were from Kentucky. They lived over the river. They listened to strange, twangy music. We sometimes called them hillbillies. But there was a problem. My Mom's best friends were from Kentucky. They had a beautiful cottage on a lake where I got my first chance to fail at trying to get up on water skis. The real problem was that Beckham and Wilma were phenomenally good people. But they were from Kentucky, and there was something almost unclean about people from Kentucky.

Let me tell you a story—again about my growing up years. When I was growing up, I didn't know many people who had been divorced. (Oh ya, my Uncle Walter had been divorced, but that was an anomaly.) One day, we got the word that the Hobergs were getting a divorce. The Hobergs were members of the congregation in which Bev and I grew up. Oh, was this a scandal! *The Hobergs* were getting a divorce. And getting a divorce was a little like being unclean. But the problem was I knew the Hobergs. They seemed like really fine people.

Let me tell you a story, again about my growing up years, and about my *growing* up. When I was young, I didn't know anyone who was gay, or so I thought. Honestly, we didn't talk about that kind of stuff in those days. All I knew was that there was something not right about being gay, something unclean. It didn't matter what the Kinsey report told us about the great continuum within sexual identity. What mattered was that we weren't like that. Well, I went off to college. And the world was a little bigger there, or at least more open. And here's the problem. I befriended a man who eventually I discovered was gay--Allie was his name. Allie was a remarkable vocalist and a great dancer, a bit like Sammy Davis Junior, for those of you who recognize that name. He remains a performer in Broadway plays today. Allie sang at our wedding. He was a really good guy, but he was *gay*.

Let me tell you a story. Or let me allow Peter to tell you the story. He was a lot like me, a real religious guy. He obviously had done the first-half-of-life work quite well and had established the appropriate boundaries in his life. But one day, the Spirit of God messed up his life. He tells the story like this:

I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down out of heaven. [Pay attention to this, folks. If it's from heaven, this is pretty big stuff.] The sheet was being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me, [This heavenly stuff has this way of getting in our business.] And as I looked, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. [I saw unclean things.] And then I heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'Are you kidding me?' I've been a good boy most of my life. Nothing unclean has entered my lips. I am not going to eat something unclean now. A second time, a voice spoke, again from heaven. And the voice said, 'I made all this good stuff. What I made clean you shall not call unclean.'

Now you got to understand this. The focus of this story is really unclean food, but those who were thought to be unclean people. You see, Peter had just experienced Cornelius, a Roman soldier, a Gentile, an unclean person, who Acts tells us was really a good guy. "He was a devout man who along with his whole household feared God." After his encounter with Cornelius, Peter concludes: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality. God has given *even* to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Even the Gentiles! Even people from Kentucky! Even divorced people! Even gay people!

Isn't it interesting how experiences with people transform our view of them? Oh yes, sometimes that is true in a negative way. Man, we didn't realize what a pain she was until we spent time with her! But still, it is the holy encounter with the other that takes us away from only believing the conclusions that our preconceived notions provide us. It was my encounter with a Kentuckian that changed my notions

about Kentuckians. And now believe it or not, my sister, one of us, an Ohioan, is now a Kentuckian. And she is even starting to talk like them!

If we trust Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, we do well to note that it is actually the *Spirit of God* who works in our lives to break down the barriers that divide us. The story about Peter is primarily not about Peter. It is about the Spirit. It wasn't that Peter, after having read several books about Gentiles and after having written his doctoral dissertation about them, concluded that the Gentiles could be included, even if they did not become Jewish first, that is, got circumcised and kept kosher food laws. It was the Spirit who changed Peter. It was the Spirit who took him to Cornelius. It was the Spirit who gave him the vision of the lowering sheet with *all* kinds of animals on it. The Spirit of God messed with him.

The other day my friend Scott and I were talking about the very significant work of discerning the spirits. As you well know, not everything is from God. If we trust Luke, and it is worth our while doing so, the work of the Spirit is about tearing down walls, breaking down barriers. John Taylor says that the Spirit is the go-between God. The Spirit is the one who links people, connects people, links people not only with other people, but with all things, with creation itself.

If the spirit is engendering within you violence, if the spirit is causing you to dismiss people, to reject whole groups of folks, if the spirit is directing you to collapse more and more in on yourself, creating more and more rigid boundaries, if the spirit is leading you to dismiss the sacredness of the ground upon which you walk, then you know that this isn't the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God leads to connectedness, to unity. The Spirit of God messes with your little defined worlds and causes you to reach the surprising conclusion that "even among the Gentiles God at work." It is the Spirit who tells you, as the Spirit told Peter, to go to *them* and not make a distinction between us and *them*.

We Christians do well to focus on the work of the Spirit, the work of God. It is so fascinating to me that when the Book of Revelation describes the end, the final future in our second reading for today, it

speaks not of us climbing up to heaven. Even the end is not about us. The end is said to involve God coming to the earth. “Behold,” we are told in this marvelous vision, “God has set up God’s tent among us humans. He is tenting in our campground.”

For most religion, the journey toward God is about climbing up to God—you know, being cleaner than others. Life is about climbing the ladder. Revelation says, “Knock it off!” Life is about the God who comes to us, God who takes us residence on the earth, God who is busy wiping away all tears, doing away with all mourning crying, everything that tears us apart. It’s not about your climbing anywhere. It’s about God coming to us—coming to us in love and grace and forgiveness.

This, by the way, is the “single story” of the Christian faith. Now we are often busy talking about the God who doesn’t have a single story. After all, we tell the story of the Trinity—God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even God is diverse, we say. You can’t picture God in one picture, with one title. But all of the members of the Trinity are busy coming to us. All members of the Trinity are busy unifying, linking, loving, and forgiving.

Now just like God, we humans are a diverse lot. We don’t have a single story. We come in a variety of shapes and sizes and with a variety of perspectives. We talk about God in diverse ways. We experience God through disparate means. I get this feeling (“inside my bones”) that God loves diversity, for he has created so much of it. And that diversity is worth celebrating and learning about. That diversity is part of the work of the Spirit of God.

But the single story of God is about weaving together that diversity into a marvelous unity that shakes our very foundations, tears down our walls, opens up our hearts, causes us to reach surprising conclusions like “even among Gentiles God is at work, even among Kentuckians God is to be discovered.”

And you need to grasp this. When the Spirit gets ahold of you like that, you might be forever changed. You might have Kentuckians as friends and their twangy music might become some of your favorite.

When the Spirit takes you to Cornelius, you might not only have friends who are Gentiles or gay, but you also might be taught by them what it means to love and what it means to have faith. When the Spirit messes up your little orderly life, you might find yourselves journeying with divorced people who might teach you about living in a new kind of unity.

Yes, with the Spirit of God, it will be a very different world. But it's going to be so much more fun, so much more enlivening, so much more connected to the God who loves and who invites us to love one another as he has first loved us.