



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 5 (C)

Us and Them

[RCL] Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

So, we are really getting into Easter now – it is the Fifth Sunday of Eastertide. The weather has gotten warmer, maybe, the days certainly longer, and maybe saying “Alleluia” still feels like a privilege after our Lenten deprivation. We have two more Sundays, three more weeks to revel in the Resurrection and to keep wondering – what does it mean for Jesus to have rolled away the rock, escaped the tomb, walked through walls in upper rooms, showed the wounds in his hands and feet, given fishing tutorials, and grilled some fish on the shore? What does it mean for Jesus to be alive, in a way so unfamiliar to us who dwell in the bounds of physical limitation and the laws of physics? How does it affect how we act? Who we are?

The Book of Acts, from which our first reading comes, could be considered the early church’s response to some of those same questions. The story is strange – imagine it: Peter has been away from Jerusalem, away from the “ground zero” of Jesus’ frightening death and puzzling resurrection. While he was away, some crazy things happened to him – things he could not have imagined as part of the people of Israel. Peter was a Jew – an ethnic and religious minority who had figured out how to resist being swallowed up first by the Egyptians, then the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, and the Persians, and then, in Jesus’ time, the Romans. They figured out how to survive in a hostile environment by being so distinct – not eating certain foods, not worshipping the king or emperor *du jour*, preferring to marry among their own ethnic group, and being circumcised. All these distinctive identity markers provided some security through their solidarity with one another.

To take an example from today – think about bikers. Some of you may be bikers and enjoy riding around on Harley-Davidsons. When you put on the leather jacket or the bandana or the chaps, you are marking yourself as part of a community, which enables the possibility of establishing friendships more easily with others who are also bikers – there are particular mores and styles of dress that provide a sense of identity and security.

Clearly, this analogy has limitations, but the point is that the Jews and their distinct way of life enabled a community to form that offered its people some protection from and resistance to those more powerful than them.

So, Peter, a circumcised Jew, returns from his trip and reports back to the headquarters of the Jesus Movement there in Jerusalem. And he has to respond to their confusion, and maybe even a sense of betrayal that Peter had violated the group's norms. He had the gall to cross the line and eat with Gentiles. The higher-ups were likely afraid of losing the meager protection and security that being Jewish provided; it was important for their survival as a distinct people to keep "them" separate from "us." And Peter could understand their confusion. After all, we know that Peter really wanted to get things right. And before this strange vision of a white sheet being lowered from heaven filled with nearly as many animals as went aboard Noah's Ark, Peter was his typical self-righteous self – he wouldn't eat with "them," the Gentiles, and "they" needed to become like Peter, to follow specific dietary laws, to not work on Saturday, to be circumcised in order to become a follower of Jesus. In fact, it took the sheet being lowered three times, and a voice speaking to him three times, for him to get the message.

But after this experience, Peter realized that mixing Jews and Gentiles wasn't only permissible – it was actually desired by God! So, he confidently proceeded to explain to headquarters how this came to be. Really, he explained his own new understanding, which opened the door for the conversion of Gentiles.

Can you imagine Jesus in all this? Can't you imagine Jesus pulling his hair out over this? Thinking, "What? How could they possibly be squabbling over this? I loved eating with all sorts of people – folks at the locally owned drive-in, Latino folks with their barbequed goat in the trailer park, McDonald's (yes, I enjoy the people there!), and even the occasional invitation to the exclusive country club. I would eat with just about anyone. How could they not get this? Oh, it's Peter I'm dealing with here. He usually needs something dramatic to understand new things."

Working through the Holy Spirit, Jesus constructs this marvelous and strange vision: sheets, four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, birds, and the voice saying, "Get up Peter. Kill and eat," undoubtedly in the most dramatic "God voice" the Holy Spirit could muster. And the vision didn't just come to Peter. Another one comes to a Gentile, an uncircumcised soldier named Cornelius. Cornelius had a vision in which a voice instructed him to invite Peter to come over for a meal. And before the meal was over, the Holy Spirit fell upon everyone there, and the whole lot was baptized... without being circumcised! Peter really had no choice in the matter; this incorporation of Gentiles into the Holy People of God wasn't Peter's idea – it was God's. And who was Peter to get in the way of God's plan?

Well, as he tells this "outrageous, it could only be a God-thing" story to headquarters, the most amazing thing happened. The higher-ups, too, become converted to a new way of thinking. They move from a concern about who is in and out, an understandable fear in their context, toward freedom from fear, culminating in praise. *Culminating in praise*. God has given the gift of repentance, that repentance that leads to life, to more people than they could have imagined. More life, more people, more praise.

So how can this story help us? How can it help us lean into the reality of Jesus living in our midst?

First, I am reminded that Jesus yearns to communicate with us and guide us. Most of us don't hear the voice as such, but many of us do have visions of one sort or another. You know, those daydreams and pipe dreams and night dreams, those "what if..." or "in an ideal world..." kind of thoughts. Pay attention. That might be the Spirit.

Second, communicating with the risen Jesus is risky. Sometimes the message is comforting but sometimes it is inconvenient, likely to be misunderstood by others. Peter could have dismissed the vision as being too strange or too uncomfortable to even bother understanding. But thank God, he didn't, for we are the Gentiles upon whom the Holy Spirit fell, for whom there is a space at the table.

Third, though we don't know where Jesus' spirit will lead us, we can be assured there will be conversion and change involved. As we continue to get to know the living Jesus, we simultaneously discover parts of ourselves that have yet to become aligned with God's better-than-imaginable dream for the world, for our congregation, for you, and for me. This story isn't just about the conversion of the Gentiles; it is also about the deepening of Peter's conversion, the deepening of his understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, the ever-expanding invitation to join the Holy People of God, and the extinction of the "out" category.

And finally, this story is a reminder that learning to listen to the resurrected Jesus is intertwined with learning to listen to one another. Peter listened to that voice. And he also listened to the Gentile, Cornelius, who invited him to dinner. And the folks in headquarters? Well in the process of listening to Peter's testimony, quieting their internal dialogues, and setting aside their own agendas, they were able to hear God's voice and live into God's vision of everyone having a place at the table.

So, I wonder: What nudges and daydreams do the people of our faith community have to explore with one another? What risks Jesus is inviting us to take? What parts of ourselves are ripe for conversion to love, to the dissolution of the world's boundaries which tell us that some people are in and others are out? How might we listen to each other's dreams and, through them, hear the voice of God, beckoning us to the banquet of love?

***The Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer** serves as the rector of Grace Church in the Mountains, in Waynesville, N.C. She has degrees from Davidson College, University of Edinburgh, and Episcopal Divinity School. In this phase of life, most of her discretionary time is lovingly devoured by small children. Her two primary spiritual disciplines are child-rearing and sermon-writing, and she is regularly humbled by both.*