

God Is Still Speaking

Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18

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The story for today from the Acts of the Apostles has informed my own theology as much as any other text in the Bible. Other texts have instructed me and informed and inspired. This passage transforms me. I read it through several times each year, and each time I find myself filled with hope that the day will come when no one on any of the continents on earth will be regarded as unclean or as second class citizens or as the target of discrimination.

Peter looks up and sees something like a bed sheet descending from heaven. It is covered with all the animals typically considered unclean at that time. The unclean animals, of course, represent all the ‘outsiders,’ all those considered to be living outside of the circle of God’s redeeming love. For Peter, that would have meant the entire Gentile world. Since his boyhood, he had considered the Gentiles as unclean, as some how inferior beings. The Gentiles would have been the butt of his jokes, the focus of his bullying.

Then Peter hears the voice of God. It is a voice that penetrates his heart and his bones and his brain. The voice says, **“What I have made clean, you must not call profane.”** In the same way that this voice penetrated Peter’s very being, this voice has penetrated me; changed me; liberated me. When I look up and see that bed sheet descending from heaven, I see all the categories of people I once allowed myself to consider beneath me. If their name wasn’t Anglo-Saxon sounding, I held them in suspicion. If they didn’t attend a Congregational Church, I held them at a distance. If their native tongue wasn’t English, I wondered if they were spies.

And then, one by one, things began to happen. In high school I dated a Catholic girl and discovered she was the kindest person I had ever met. In college, my first roommate was a Mormon and I discovered he was the most moral man I had ever known. In the Peace Corps I met a Southern Baptist missionary from Dallas, Texas who changed forever my understanding of what it means to have an evangelical faith. In seminary I had a preaching professor from the Black Church tradition and discovered a human being who enabled me to feel some feelings I didn't even know existed in my storehouse of emotions. On the Cheyenne Sioux Reservation I met an elder Lakota woman, Jenny Hunt, who outdid my own grandmother in showing hospitality. In Wisconsin, I met Emmett Terwilliger, Jr., a hog farmer who slopped hogs by day, but prayed with passion at the deacon meeting at night. In South Glastonbury, I met Bob and Marie Calvin whose daughter had come out to them, and they are the ones who invited me to let go of any vestige of homophobia I may have retained at that time.

So, this passage from the Acts of the Apostles is rather personal for me. It's gotten a hold of me. It's shaped me. And I believe it was the author's intent that this story of the bed sheet and the unclean animals shape the ethos of every local church.

The church of Jesus Christ is to be a different sort of community, a band of women and men and youth and children who accept and affirm each other regardless of such things as mental capacity or sexual orientation or athletic prowess or ethnic heritage or economic standing. For, what God has made clean, no one is to consider profane.

On our mission trip this past week in New Jersey, we met a woman who might well appear on that TV show about hoarders. She has become nearly disabled by the extent of her hoarding. It would have been easy for us to ridicule her or judge her or scorn her for what appeared to be a nightmare of a living situation.

But we found ourselves feeling her pain, seeing that she has a mental illness, realizing that what she needs is a church! All her neighbors consider her “unclean.” And in a literal sense it can be said that she is unclean. But from a spiritual perspective she is as clean as the rest of us, made in the image of God as the rest of us are, hungry for love as the rest of us are, desiring affirmation as the rest of us are.

In addition to calling in a plumber and an electrician, we also phoned a psychiatrist for an evaluation. We’re looking into the local churches in the area to see if there is one where her mental health would not be a source of further derision, a faith community who will refuse to look upon her as a misfit, but as a daughter of God. We’re hoping to find a Peter church in her neighborhood.

When people in Glastonbury search for a new church home, I suppose they are looking for a grand choir or a fine preacher or an active youth group or a vital church school. I hope they find all of the above here at South Church. But more than that, I hope they find a community where a banner is really a bed sheet, a symbol of radical welcome; where it doesn’t matter if your last name ends in SKI or SKY or SK or S; where it doesn’t matter if you refer to morning worship as the service or the mass or the meeting. Where it doesn’t matter if you say tomato or tomato. My hope is that we are becoming a Peter church where there are no distinctions, just an earnest desire to be a vessel for God’s love in this world.

At the end of the passage for today from the Acts of the Apostles, it says that the community was stunned into silence! It was clear to them that God was still speaking, that God had more light to reveal, that God had more truth to unpack. My sisters and brothers, I tell you: God is STILL speaking. Listen closely and you shall hear: ‘What I have deemed to be clean, you must no longer regard as profane.’ In the greatest of hope, Amen!

