

“Who Am I To Stand in the Way of God? Peter’s Gospel of Radical Inclusion!”

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Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

Acts 11 ¹ Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴

Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "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 from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ⁸

But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." ¹⁵

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁷ If then 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?" ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Sermon

In our scripture reading this morning, we learn that Jesus' gospel was beginning to spread far and wide, not only was it crossing political borders but to some of "those people" or non-Jews.

Peter's new understanding of this gospel has made him an advocate for the radical inclusion of gentiles which, as we see here, became a major controversy for the early church.

Yes my friends, I know it maybe seem hard to believe, but conflicts in the church have been with us from the very beginning.

Sadly, we know all too well that there are still conflicts in our world, in both church and society, that still separate folks from one another.

But as contemporary followers of Jesus we too must speak out
and we must also seek to practice similar radical inclusion!

Peter's gospel could be easily be summarized as,
"God's love knows no borders!"
(Hmm... now where have I heard that before?)

And we are most fortunate that his side prevailed
and fortunate, that the Creator, in love and infinite wisdom,
keeps on reminding us of this deep and abiding truth.

Now I know that some of you are familiar with Clarence Jordan
and have heard or read some of his
"Cotton Patch Versions" of the Bible.

For those who don't, he was a white biblical scholar/ farmer
who helped found an interracial community during the 1940's
in rural Georgia named Koinonia farms.

It became an unprecedented example of radical racial inclusion
in an era of overt racism and state-sanctioned segregation.

Needless to say, this community and his view of Peter's gospel
were not popular in the segregated and racist south,
and so he and the community was harshly persecuted.

Allow me to read his interpretation of this morning's passage.

From the book of "Happenings," chapter 11.

Now the news spread to both preachers and laymen throughout Georgia that other races were responding to the word of God. So when Rock returned to Atlanta, some who believe in segregation tore into him. "You went home with folks who aren't white," they shouted, "and you were eating with them!" Rock then got going and laid the matter out for them just like it happened:

"I was down there in Brunswick engaged in a bit a meditation, and in my ecstasy, I had a vision. I saw this outfit coming down that looked like a big tablecloth being lowered by its four corners, and it came to where I was. When I looked inside of it, I got really puzzled. For what did I see but meats of all kinds imaginable, and sea foods, and a complete assortment of fowl. Then I heard someone calling me, 'Come on Rock sit down and eat.' But I said, 'Oh, no sir, I have never taken the first bite of anything that was inferior or wasn't strictly kosher.' Again, the voice from the sky spoke: 'If God makes something kosher, don't you treat it as dirty.' This was repeated, and the whole business was pulled back up into the sky.

And would you believe it, at that moment three men knocked on the door where I was staying. They had been sent there from Augusta. The spirit told me to go with them without the slightest hesitation. I went, and took with me these six brothers. After we arrived at the guy's house, he told us how he had seen the messenger standing in his house saying, 'Send to Brunswick and fetch a Simon who

goes by the nickname of Rock; he will give you some information on how you and your whole family may be rescued.'

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came over them just as it had to us in the beginning. It reminded me of something the Lord had told us: 'John did dip people in water, but you all will be dipped in the Holy Spirit.' Well, then, if God's gift to them was exactly the same as ours when we put our faith in Lord Jesus Christ, what right did I have to argue with God?" Upon hearing this explanation, they came down off their high horse and started praising God. "Then it's a fact," they said, "that God has given to the Negroes the transformed life."

Now I am certain that most of you are comfortable with Clarence's "updated" version of this passage.

More than 50 years after it was written, agreeing with Jordan that segregation based upon racism is an anathema to the Gospel of Jesus Christ seems irrefutable.

But the power of racism and suspicions of "the other" still plague us today! Sexual minorities in our own denomination are certainly one group, as well as newly arrived immigrants especially in our own town.

So, permit me to try my hand at another version for our own time and place.

Now all the pastors in Larimer County were becoming greatly distressed by the ever growing number of new immigrants crossing the US border without sufficient documents and moving into their communities. Now when they had gathered for their monthly prayer breakfast, they began to attack Pastor Steen (which is Low German for Rock) for not only worshipping with such criminals, but also for allowing his congregation to offer them food, shelter and legal aid.

So, Pastor Steen stepped up to the microphone and began to explain to them calmly and in plain English (making sure not to confuse them with any of his Platte Deutche) how his own heart had been changed! "I was in my office one day, deep in prayer and meditation upon scripture when I had this vision.

Now believe you me, I was a bit skeptical at first, since we Mennonites are not usually given to such ecstatic experiences. But the vision persisted, and in this vision, I saw something like a bed sheet coming down from heaven, stretched out by its four corners. But as it got closer, I began to see that it was actually a very large map of the western hemisphere and it was quite detailed with mountains, rivers, lakes, shorelines, major cities as well as highways. But I also noticed one very glaring omission - there were no borderlines.

Then I heard a voice say, "Take this map to all those who seek to follow me throughout Larimer County and ask them, "Does God's Love have borders!"

"But Lord," I replied, "how can this be? Don't we need borders and laws to avoid chaos? I, myself have never broken a single law, why I never even go more than five miles per hour over the posted speed limit!"

But the voice thundered again (a bit annoyed and louder this time), "This is not an opinion but my truth from the beginning of time! I have formed everyone the same and each person is of great value to me. My love knows no limits and

transcends all borders. No person should be called illegal!” Boy, was I ever confused and so the whole process had to happen three times before it finally sunk in.

But then my trance was broken by a pounding on the side door of the church. When I answered it a family of three were standing there. Using what little Spanish I know I learned that they had just arrived from Chihuahua. They were obviously frightened and in need of help. They asked me to come with them and I did, for I felt a strange urging that I must. Also a great calmness came over me since I didn’t even think to ask them if they had legal documentation to be here in the US. I also had not a single worry what might happen if the County Sheriff stopped us.

As we went along, I called the Elders on my cell phone and they, along with three other members of the fellowship, agreed to meet me at the office of a local immigration attorney. She was able to translate for us and we heard their story of the difficult journey over the border and through the desert, the abuse from unscrupulous employers, the harassment of local law enforcement, of the forced separation from other family members and how their faith had sustained them through it all!

Then the attorney shared that she had been actually told in a vision to send these folks to our Fellowship. That the voice had told her that we were believers who had open and generous hearts. “After all,” the angel said, “these folks should know about hospitality to strangers, since their own ancestors had been hunted down and persecuted by governments and that they too had crossed many borders in order to live out their faith.”

And so, as we shared stories and food (Mexicans and Mennonites do have somethings in common!), it became clear to me that God’s love never makes distinctions and that the Spirit of God can dwell deeply within every person. Our differences in language and culture are not curses but gifts and that we are all, ‘precious in God’s sight!’

But I must admit, some apprehensions were beginning to grow in me as I spoke. For to be faithful to this vision might lead others to misunderstand me, or to not like me, or to even attack me and maybe even to breaking the law in order to do what is right!

But I was also reminded of something Jesus once told his disciples, ‘John may have baptized you with water, but for those who follow me you will be immersed in something far more powerful, the Spirit of God, which flows over us abundantly to give us peace and courage.’”

And at this the Larimer County pastors didn’t know what to say!

But slowly, quiet murmurs gave way to full throated praises to God. For they all finally began to understand, in a way that none of them had ever before understood, that God’s love knows no limits. They too began to understand that those who seek to follow Jesus, each and everyone of us, can experience God’s love deeply and can experience true repentance!

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