

## Changing the Focus

During the Easter season, in place of Old Testament readings, we get passages from the Acts of the Apostles. The text is about the formation of the early church, and we are supposed to learn from the Apostles how to act in the world and run our churches in the reality of the resurrected Christ. What we learn is that the early church is not that different from the modern church. People are, after all, still people, and we have the same tendencies and squabbles.

Peter is dealing with a pretty classic situation about the who to let in and under what circumstances in order to still hold your identity as a church. He is confronting a situation in which he is serving a church full of Jewish followers of Jesus, we'll call them the original Christians, who are upset that he has reached out to the Gentiles and made accommodations for them to find their own space in Christian worship. The issue was around eating non-kosher food, but the principle is that they were not sufficiently orthodox and traditional, so that their worship was in turn not seen as appropriately holy. Peter himself starts off in this camp. When the vision of the sheet with the food comes down, God tells him to eat, and he says no, because that food simply isn't right and he has never eaten anything that was deemed 'unclean.' He basically says to God, "No. Let me explain this to you, oh creator of the universe and giver of the law: that is not holy, so I'm not going to eat it."

Peter had his limits. Teaching the Gentiles, okay. Preaching the gospel to them, fine. Converting them, baptizing them, all good. He even excelled at it. But eating with them – sharing real community, not only changing them, but being changed in return, now that's just a step too far. And that is where the problem lay. There couldn't be real outreach to gentiles unless Peter was willing to eat at their tables. No real community could exist without breaking bread together. How can you teach anyone about communion, the shared bread and wine around one table, if you aren't actually willing to eat with them? But initially Peter was choosing his personal idea of holiness above reaching out in love to these folks. That is, until God sends the sheet the third time and tells him to never again call anything unclean or unworthy that God had already declared holy.

To understand Peter's perspective, we have to remember that religion, for so long had been about setting boundaries and building walls – both figuratively and literally. Think about the history of Israel that Peter would have counted as his own history. After the Exodus they set out to establish the boundaries of their land and to keep foreigners at bay. They even set boundaries on the limits of each tribe – Judah here, Benjamin there, Ruben in the far corner, and so forth. They built walled cities to control the coming and going of people. When the exiles come back after captivity in Babylon, one of the first things they do is rebuild the walls of the city; it's what the whole book of Nehemiah is about. They work at it in shifts, night and day until it is done, because solid barriers make for strong religion. Then there are the more metaphorical boundaries – don't eat that, wash at these time, don't touch anyone who is sick, you must be circumcised to be counted among the Jews, and so forth. You can see how Peter would think that keeping these rules in place was so important. It seemed to be the most central aspect of the

religious life. Except it wasn't. Walls can never be the center, by definition. They are the extremities. And this is what Jesus is trying to remind Peter in the vision.

It's as though he is saying to Peter, "You are spending all of your time walking around the perimeter, but you have neglected the center. You are always looking outward, but what about the heart of the matter. You are spending so much time securing the walls that you have forgotten what is within the city worth protecting. Look to me and remember what I taught you, otherwise there is nothing worth proclaiming, much less protecting."

Most of us, and our churches, suffer from the same problem. We construct walls of rules, set down principles as boundary markers, and pile up vast theological doctrines and beliefs, all so important we are sure, in an effort to create a solid structure. And we tend to those barriers constantly, shoring them up to make our faith more secure we think. But all the while, the only solid thing we have is sitting right at the center, lifted high on a cross that he might draw all people to himself, and have them eat at his table. He stands there beckoning us to stop turning our back on the center of our faith, the hope of our religion, and instead to focus on him, and to intentionally focus on making him clear and inviting others in through our love for one another. That is the goal, that others would know, not that they would be held at bay, but be drawn to the Christ that we know, and that serves as the source of our love and the center of our faith.

Sometimes we act as though Jesus' final admonition to his disciples was, "by this all people will know that you are my disciples – that you pray with all the right words at the right times, believe every article of the creed with all your heart every time you said it, don't associate with the wrong kinds of people, give a certain amount to the poor, and remain absolutely holy – whatever that means." But that just isn't what he said. To be honest, sometimes I think that would have been easier than what he actually said. But what he told them was, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That is what he is reminding Peter, and us, in this passage. That the surest sign of following Christ, of pointing to the center, is to love the other in a notable, sometimes uncomfortable, boundary stretching way.

I've never heard anyone come to church and say, my neighbor was just so pious that I decided to follow her one Sunday morning and see where she was going. I have, however, heard people come to church because they had neighbors who were truly loving in a way that was appealing and enticing, and drew them into community. That is the great hope, that all might orient their lives toward the center, be known by the love we have for one another, and change the world by making the need for barriers obsolete.

Karen Armstrong, the famous British religion writer, published an autobiographical work a few years ago titled *The Spiral Staircase*. In it she writes that religion is not about having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions; instead religion is "about doing things that change you." "The religious life," she concludes, "is supposed to make people act in ways that change them forever."

Peter was changed in this story. We are called to be changed by our interactions with others – to have our faith stretched and our love expanded in new and unforeseen ways as we reach out to others. But just as importantly, we are called to change others by our love, not coercively but decisively as we embody God's love for them and point them to the center. This is no longer a religion of walls, boundaries, and barriers. That is part of the new commandment

Jesus left. We are a religion bound by our focus, not on holding the perimeter, but on grasping the hand of the other and inviting them to the banquet at the center of our faith.

Jesus is begging us, stop keeping people out. The whole point was to draw people in. You can't teach people about love and refuse to eat with them at the same time. As they come to the table, hands out, wanting to experience this thing, they glimpse the love of God in the love shared by those around the altar. That is the most holy moment, and we cannot declare it unholy.

Jesus wants us to refocus our lives on the center and not the periphery, and then through acts of love, help others to turn toward that center, and start moving closer. As soon as Peter finishes his vision, three men show up and put his new understanding into action – and Peter makes no distinction between “them and us.” I don't know who shows up next wanting to eat at our table, but let's meet who it is with only the language of ‘us’ and by our shared love. May they know that we are his disciples, living lives focused on the Christ at the center, and marked by our love for one another. Amen.