

Fifth Sunday of Easter/May 19, 2019
Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35;
Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"New Visions"

Three beautiful readings for us to consider today. The one that most caught my attention was that story from Acts. We have Peter, who has gone out among the many villages, spreading the message of Christ, healing the disabled and raising the dead. He is clearly in touch with the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. And Luke (the author of this book) has the Spirit directing him to go places and to do things, and Peter responds, seemingly without question.

Here in our passage for today, Peter comes before the leaders of this new Jewish movement, called The Way, in Jerusalem, the movement's headquarters. They have heard that he has gone to the Gentiles with the message of Christ. This is disconcerting for them, because up to that point, this has been pretty much an exclusively Jewish thing. Their leader and teacher, Jesus was Jewish, and all of his close followers were Jewish. And although Jesus went to many outside of Judaism, the Samaritans, the Syrophonicians, Gadarenes, and others that would have been called Gentiles, people who were considered "unclean" and inappropriate to associate with, the followers of The Way, had not accepted such people yet into their midst. They still held tightly to their Jewish laws and norms.

So the church leaders were understandably suspicious of Peter and some within their ranks actually criticized him. They said, *"Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"* Yes, he not only met with them, but ate with them, shared a meal with them, broke bread with them. Clearly a violation of Jewish custom and Deuteronomic law and not something done by good, observant Jews. And certainly Peter considered himself a good, observant and committed Jewish man. And the other church leaders needed to know what was going on with Peter. What in the world was he thinking?!

Peter therefore tells them the story. Now Luke has already told us this story once in the previous chapter. So we know it is important in that he includes the whole story a second time as Peter tells it to the Jerusalem group. And a quick aside here. It is interesting that the words used to describe this group of critics, referred to here as the *"circumcised believers"*, in the older RSV they are referred to as the *"circumcision party."* Yes! Like a political party! The early church, as much as at any time within the church's history, was a political arena. They had their conservatives and their liberals and all kinds in between, just as the church does today.

Anyway, Peter doesn't tell them, that he had gone up on a roof top to pray and became hungry, which is possibly the reason he fell into a trance and perhaps why the vision had to do with eating animals. But he tells them of the vision: a large sheet filled with animals, coming down out of heaven, with instructions from God to go ahead and eat of any of them. At which, Peter responds, that he cannot, for the dietary restrictions of his religion prohibit him from doing so. But the voice says *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."* And this happens 3 times. A sign of the importance of this vision.

Peter then tells them about his visit with this man Cornelius, a centurion, an Italian, a Gentile, and how the *Spirit* directed him to go and to *"not make a distinction between them and us."* And then, how the Gentiles exhibited signs of the Holy Spirit, just as had happened to the

disciples at Pentecost! And then Peter says to them, *"If then God gave the them the same gift that we were given when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"* And the Jerusalem leaders were silenced. But they praised God, and said *"Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."* They were astonished. They understood then that they were being given a *new vision*.

So what is this about? First, I have to tell you, that I was inspired by this story. And listening to what I experienced as the Holy Spirit, an urging within me, I went up on our own roof top, the belfry, to see if I might receive a vision. And while I didn't necessarily receive a vision, I did, like Peter, get hungry!

But I want to point out, that the vision Peter had, while seeming to be about dietary restrictions, was something he interpreted in a broader, wider scope, that it had to do with seeing *all that God has made, including people*, to be acceptable, not unclean, or common or profane. It is this *vision* then, that leads to a major shift in the early church, *the ministry and inclusion of Gentile peoples*. And since Peter, the foremost leader within the early church, was leading this change, it made it all the more acceptable when Paul also committed to minister to the Gentiles.

Our other readings speak of visions as well. John, in his apocalyptic writing of Revelation, tells of a *vision of a new heaven and a new earth*. A vision of God and humanity dwelling together. Where God proclaims, *"See, I am making all things new!"*

And in John's gospel, we hear the words of Jesus, teaching his disciples of his *new commandment*. This is surely Jesus' vision for his followers, as he says to them, *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* This is *Christ's vision* for the Church. That we love one another!

In a time when the church is undergoing radical change, feeling the pressures of a more secular society, and experiencing what has been called *"The Demise of Christianity"*, some are saying we are entering a new era, a time when the church is more aware of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

A couple things about the Holy Spirit. Some think that the Spirit of God only comes to certain people - holy people, pure, sinless people, saints and prophets and those types. This is not true, nor what the church teaches. The Spirit of God is available and comes to *all people*. The catch is, that *we*, have to be open to that Spirit and willing to listen to the Spirit's voice.

The other myth about the Spirit, is that it calls us only to great and grand visions and actions. We might think of Martin Luther King, Jr. who proclaimed, *"I have a dream!"* and told of his vision saying *"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."* Or we might think of others who have written eloquently, or sung, or spoken words that have inspired us all. Yes, we say, those people have been called by the Spirit.

But the example we have here of Peter tells us a different story. Peter, the one in the gospels who represents the common person, the fallible, bumbling disciple who never quite seems to get what Jesus is saying, the one who denies him at his most terrible hour, this Peter is

the one to whom the Spirit grants visions, but also tells him to do normal, mundane things, like *"when 3 guys show up at your house, go with them."*

The Spirit of God, is always around us. It is the arm of God that reaches out to us, that calls us to action, that bids us do the good and right thing. That may be as simple as that urge to call a friend you haven't seen for a while. Or invite the new immigrant family over for dinner and welcome them to the neighborhood. Or speak up when you witness someone being bullied or harassed. Jesus used the image of the wind to talk about the Spirit and it is a wonderful image. The Spirit can be like a strong, hurricane force wind that moves, shakes and inspires us to great things but it can also be the soft breeze, that gentle nudging to just love the person next to you.

It is easy to ignore the Spirit. I don't know how many times I have had a thought to do something, make that phone call, go and visit, say a simple hello to someone I pass on the street, and I just don't do it. And we miss all kinds of opportunities to do the Spirit's bidding. But, fortunately, the Spirit does not give up on us! It continues, constantly, to get our attention, to move us, to guide and lead us, and when it does, when we finally give in to that coaxing, when we finally unplug our ears and listen with open hearts and open minds, the Spirit may then give us a vision.

When I was up in the belfry, I did have a thought. Not what I would call a vision. But as I looked out, over the city, my attention was brought back to the big old Maple tree, the closest one to the church. I thought of that old tree, probably more than a hundred years old. And I wondered how like that old tree, is our church. And I thought that a lot of people probably see us that way, as some old thing, some relic of former years. Something that was once young and vibrant and alive, but now has lost its effectiveness, lost its influence.

But then, I noticed something. And this is where the Spirit was at work. I saw these little green and red things at the ends of the branches. Of course, I knew what they were - the buds and floweret's of the tree, the place from which leaves and seeds would spring forth, the hope for the future! And I realized, this tree may be old, may be gnarled and broken in places, but it is still vibrant and alive and it is pushin' some real action out there!

This perhaps then, was a vision. A vision of our church - First Church. And the amazing thing, is that I have seen that vision already coming to fruition. We are a growing congregation. We have new, young people in our midst, excited about taking part in our worship and ministry, two of whom were overheard a couple weeks ago, talking about what neat things could happen here. We have a group of Deacons who have proven extremely capable of leading a service and I have heard they are excited for the next time Kate and I are going to be gone! We have people doing amazing things, like the upcoming vigil and the Syrian Relief effort, the community meals, and educating on justice issues.

The Holy Spirit is alive and well here at First Church, and we, all of us, are being called to share in a vision, a new vision, a vision from our God who says, *"Behold, I am making all things new!"* So pay attention, listen, and let's share in God's vision for us, together. Amen.