

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.' 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?" 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."

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In our reading from Acts this morning, Luke isn't especially clear about who Peter is talking *to* and even less clear about who they are talking *about*. The people he is talking to, "those of the circumcision," are obviously some group of critical Jewish men, but Luke gives us nothing more.

Ironically, Luke is far more specific about the Gentiles. We even know the name of the man whose house Peter visited in Caesarea. We don't hear that name in this passage because this is the second time Luke has told this story about an extraordinary example of God making all things new.

The insight in this story is so significant for Luke and so astonishing for Peter that the story has to be told twice. Luke first describes the event as it happens just before our reading. And then, in this reading, he tells us what happened when Peter brought news of the event back to Jerusalem.

The man whose house Peter went to visit was named Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion stationed in Caesarea. Peter watched as God poured out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius, a specimen of an ultimate outsider for Luke, and all the Gentiles who were in the room with Cornelius and Peter.

What came for Peter and the Gentiles in Caesarea was a glimpse the vision of heaven that John of Patmos described in Revelation, just like it can come to us right here in the Pacific Northwest. With the eyes of faith, we too can learn to see all things becoming new.

We can see God making a home among mortals. Because God still acts in human lives, *all* human lives, even now. Even those we might consider outsiders. And what God makes clean, we need not call unholy.

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Let me tell you a story. First, you should know that I never reveal what people tell me in pastoral settings without their permission.

It was a quiet afternoon at the hospital when a knock came on the chaplain's office door. I opened it and a man standing there said, "My friend wants you to come and see him." Now, that usually means, "*I want* you to go and see my friend." And so, I told him I would check with his friend to see if he wanted me to visit.

"He's in the ICU and he needs to know Jesus."

Ah. OK.

So what this guy *really* means is "I want you to convert my friend; to fix him." All I could do was repeat my promise. That seemed to satisfy him and so as he left, I went back in the office to check his friend's chart.

Seems a very aggressive pancreatic cancer was poised to take his friend's life. And soon. He had maybe three weeks left to live. Maybe three days. I went into his room and told him that a friend had sent me and asked him if he wanted to talk. "Yeah, I do," he said. "I have a question. When I die, what am I going to say to God?"

What I thought to myself was "Oh, well, thanks for the softball." What I said was, "I don't know." And then I said, "Tell me a little about your life." He did. In fact, we talked for a couple of hours.

He thought he might have been baptized, although he had never set foot inside a church after that. He had been alone for a long time. "I've been divorced for more than 30 years," he told me. "Never did find nobody else, but when my ex found out that I was sick, she moved here and got an apartment by mine so she could help take care of me."

He had also been estranged from his only child for more than 20 years, “but,” he said, “when my son heard I was dying, he called me, and we’ve been talking on the phone almost every day for the past couple of weeks.”

“Tell me a little about your son,” I said.

“He was a pretty good kid,” the man told me. “He kinda messed up here and there, but not in ways that mattered a whole lot. I s’pose most folks liked him, I guess. All I know is that I always really loved him, even when we were apart.”

We talked for a while longer and then he asked me, “So what’s my conversation with God gonna be like when I die?”

I looked at him. He was concerned and vulnerable, but there was something else. I told him that I was seeing one example after another of broken relationships that were being bathed in forgiveness, loneliness being touched with reconnection; I saw God’s presence already at work in him making him whole even though he was unlikely to be cured.

“Do you remember what you told me about your son? I think your conversation with God will be a lot like that. I think God will say something like, ‘you kinda messed up here and there, but not in ways that mattered a whole lot. All I know is that I always really loved you, even when you thought we were apart. And I still do’.”

He stared at me for a while and then he asked me, “Do I need to do anything?” I could see that God was with him and would stay with him to wipe every tear from his eyes. Death would not have the last word.

“Well,” I said, “there are all kinds of things we *could* do...we could pray, I could bring you communion, we could talk about some other options.”

I knew that his friend wanted me to turn this man into a proper Christian, whatever that means, and yet all I could think of to add was: “Is there anything you think you’d like to do?”

A huge smile came slowly pouring out of him. “No,” he finally said, “I think I’m good.” I told him I thought he was too.

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I imagine Peter standing in front of his critics telling the story of his decision to baptize Cornelius. Telling them how he watched as God poured

out grace after grace on devout people and brought them into full membership as followers of Christ without insisting that they become Jews in the process.

Peter's choice to welcome these outsiders as equal sisters and brothers must have looked to his critics like he was consorting with the enemy. And yet, Peter was not trying to cross boundaries. He was not trying to perturb the system. God spoke and acted in Peter's life, and moved him into a situation where he was exposed to his own stereotypes, biases and social conditioning.

Once there, by opening his eyes in faith, Peter watched the Holy Spirit in action. And then Peter remembered what the Risen Christ had said to him in the last moments before his ascension to heaven: "John indeed baptized in water, but you will be baptized in a Holy Spirit."

"So," Peter concluded, "if God gave them a gift equal to the one he gave us when we had faith in the Lord Jesus the Anointed, who was I that I might hinder God?"

God showed Peter and, through Peter's story, shows us that not one tribe or another, but *all* of creation is pregnant with God's Jerusalem being made new for *all people*. Peter's vision handed down to us eliminates any excuse for hate and exposes our speculations about who is "Us" and who is "Them" in the eyes of God.

When God decides to pour graces on whomever God chooses to bless, who are we, any of us, to get in God's way? What happened to Peter can happen to any one of us and often when we least expect it. What will we do when the Holy Spirit appears and challenges each of us in this way?

This is how the Holy Spirit reminds us and teaches us that Christ said not just to love one another. The new commandment is: "Just as I have loved you...*just as I have loved you*...you also should love one another."

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