SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

May 5, 2024

*From Old Habits to New Songs* Acts 10:44-48

Two weeks from today, as I mentioned earlier, we will celebrate the *first* Pentecost (and BTW everybody: remember to wear **RED on May 19**). However, today’s reading is what is known as the *second* Pentecost. We are going to go back in time on the 19th. *Both* Pentecost events were experienced by some of the people we just heard about.

Chief among them was Peter who, according to what we hear about him throughout the Gospels, was quite impetuous and passionate. He is the one who is always ready to go, and he is also the one who wanted to stop, set-up camp and *live* on a mountain top with Jesus. [Luke 9:28-36]

For all of his bluff and bluster, the Peter we get to know is a man who falters. All four of the Gospels describe Peter as a man who is brave one moment and frightened the next. He is sure one day and disbelieving and unsure the next. He is the first to react, and the first to be rebuked.

Peter was the first one to proclaim Jesus as the Christ. Yet only a few verses later, in both the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, as Jesus begins to describe the suffering and death this will bring, it is Peter who tries to silence him, causing Jesus to admonish him in no uncertain terms. [Mark 8:32-33; Matthew 16:22-23]

The Gospel of Matthew recounts the story of Peter calling to Jesus that he will meet in on the water if Jesus will only allow it. Yet once he is actually out of the boat, after just a few steps, his faith wavers and he begins to sink beneath the waves, [Matthew 14:30] impetuous, like the ducks that were just commenting.

In the Gospel of John, at the beginning of the Last Supper, as Jesus prepares to wash the disciples’ feet, Peter initially refuses to let Jesus do this. However, when Jesus tells him that unless Peter allows him to do this, he, meaning Peter, will have no share in him, Peter immediately responds saying, ‘Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!’ [John 13:9]

The three Synoptic Gospels all mention that, when Jesus was arrested, one of his companions cut off the ear of a servant of the High Priest. The fourth gospel, the Gospel of John, also includes this event and names Peter as the swordsman. [John 18:10]

And of course, after Jesus’ arrest, all four Gospels record how Peter, who vehemently declared his loyalty to Jesus at the Last Supper, denies he knows or has even met him just a few hours later. [Matthew 29:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-27]

What we see throughout the Gospel stories is a man who is deeply moved, but whose courage and loyalty is tested and often found wanting. We read or listen to his story and cringe and are ashamed for him. What we cannot deny is that Peter’s struggle to remain faithful and committed—especially in the face of danger and possible injury and death—this is a struggle we all know. Ours may not involve the possibility of arrest, or the kind of public disapproval and criticism Peter faced. However, our loyalty to our own values—the values we learned and commit to as Christ followers—is tested every day, just like Peter’s was.

Our good news is that—just like Peter—we too can grow and change. The story we just heard is a great example of the way in which Peter grows and how his life is changed—his heart and his mind are greatly changed. His life and his circle of fellowship is enlarged by the Spirit of God whose main work is in opening our eyes to one another.

The passage that was read for us this morning is actually the climax to a story that has been building since the very beginning of the Book of Acts. Not all of the story has included Peter, front and center, as the main character. However, as one of the apostles he would have been apprised of all that had been going on with the other apostles, the deacons, and the believers who were now scattered across the region.

For example, he knew what had happened with Philip when he went to the city of Samaria. When reports came back to them of many people embracing the Word of God, and being healed and having demons cast out of them, Peter and John are sent to check on this phenomenon. Peter and John see the good Philip is doing, and they stay and help usher the people into the presence of the Spirit.

Then, instead of going back to Jerusalem, Peter travels throughout the region. In chapter 9, we are told that: “Peter went here and there among all the believers.” [9:32] In fact, Peter in today’s reading, is now taking the ministry westward into Lydda and Joppa. It is there, in Joppa, in the home of a man named Simon that Peter receives a vision that calls him to the home of a Roman centurion in the largely Gentile city of Caesarea.

That Peter went there at all is a testimony to the way in which his heart and mind are changing. Normally, an observant Jew—which Peter certainly was—would not even have entered the home of a Gentile. However, that was then and this is now. This is Peter in a new day and with the Spirit; a new day where old habits, and old biases, are left behind.

Once inside the Gentile’s home, Peter meets humility and deep commitment to God in the centurion and his family. He bears witness to their faithfulness and it is proved to him by the Spirit who descends upon the whole family causing them to speak in tongues—a sure sign of the blessing of the Spirit’s presence with and within them.

Try to imagine what Peter is going through at that moment. Everything he has believed about Gentiles; every feeling of discrimination and intolerance is being tested. As he begins to describe how he knows that God shows no partiality, but accepts everyone who loves God, his words are brought to life before him as the centurion and his family are blessed.

To his everlasting credit, Peter instantly realizes what must be done next. All of these *people*—not Gentiles, *people*—must be baptized. Which is to say: their adoption into the family of Christ with the same status as the ones he already knows, this is now secure for them. They are now sisters and brothers, welcomed with the same compassion and fellowship as all the others before them.

This is what happens when the Spirit comes among us. We can welcome her, or we can walk away, unchanged. Peter chose to go through the door opened by the Spirit.

In Acts 10, both Peter and Cornelius receive visions and visitations that change them. Peter’s visions and visitation convince him to cross the threshold between the Jewish and Gentile worlds and begin intentionally leading non-Jews to Christ.

At that point in history, the church was small, a fledgling movement led by ordinary people who had been given an extraordinary message. Peter could have ignored the Spirit and remained in Joppa. However, the Spirit was at work in his heart and his mind. It has shown him something new and wonderous—his world has become enlarged—not only by the Spirt of God, but also by the spirit of the people—even Gentiles—who have come to know and love God.

They, too, were changed. Their hearts and minds, too, have grown—just like Peter’s, and as one pastor, United Methodist pastor, the Rev. Brain McLaren has observed “a mind that expands to embrace new ideas can never shrink to its previous size.”

Many new ideas, many new people are brought into our lives every day. Sometimes we see or hear their stories in some form of the media. Sometimes, if we are fortunate, we hear their stories when we meet them face-to-face—the way Peter met Cornelius and his family.

What this story asks us to meditate on is: who is also asking us to see them, and to hear their stories? Most of all, we are being asked how we will react to a story—ie. a *person*—who is different than ourselves.

The bad news is that the world is filled with such people: people without homes, people in prison or newly released from prison, people who are sick, people who are dying, people who are grieving, people who are seeking reconciliation. Many, many people—many are strangers, but many are also neighbors.

When the apostle Peter was faced with a crowd of Gentiles whose ways were not his ways, and whose thoughts were not his thoughts, he knew (and had learned) that God was doing a new thing. And when God is doing a new thing, you have got to let go of your old thing, whatever that thing may be. Peter began to sing a familiar hymn to a new tune, like we are going to do with the rounds later. Peter began to sing a familiar hymn to a new tune, a new beat and a new band — one which included Gentiles. It was a shocking turn of events. Notice the reaction of the other people in the room. The bible says: “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” [v. 45]

Several old habits were jettisoned and left behind that day because the Spirit had shown up and the unthinkable had happened: even the Gentiles were heirs of the good news, even the marginalized, even the homeless, even the addicts, even singles, even the non-traditional families, even ethnic communities—we are all heirs of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Getting rid of old habits is not easy. Change is often painful, but as someone once said: “Change does happen when we become discontented enough with the status quo to actively take steps out of our pain.”

I cannot remember if I already reminded you of this story. If I have, too bad, I am going to tell it to you again.

It came at the end of a Faith Action for Community Equity campaign you—NCC—and many other churches of various faith backgrounds were involved in. We had come together with the people of Kuhio Park Terrance. The tenants had been worried about being able to stay in their homes after the planned renovations were supposed to happen.

One congregation was predominantly Samoan and led by a Samoan priest. I no longer remember his name, but I remember what he told us he had said to his church after receiving the support of so many other churches. He said to them:

*“For all the time I have been your priest, I have tried to keep you safe here in our church, by ourselves. Now I see that we have neighbors who will stand with us. I see that the gate has been opened. Now we will go out and be neighbors with them.”*

Friends, let us step out into the Living Hope of Jesus Christ, looking for God who opens new doors and brings new people into our lives. Let us do the new things such experiences teach us; in our congregation and in our personal lives. Let us follow the Holy Spirit as it leads us to new paths and into a future that God is constantly renewing.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, open our eyes to the Spirit’s presence. Help us to leave behind old habits of thought and heart and to step forward into your future where we may encounter many new people and ideas. When we fail, give us grace. When we succeed, may we give you all the glory. May all that we do and say be only for your sake and for the greatness of your name. We are your church. Amen.