SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Holy Disturbances”*

As most of us may have surmised, the passage that was just read for us was the *climax* of chapter 10 in the Book of Acts. In the earlier verses, Peter has gone through a couple of experiences that have changed his mind, changed the course of his life, and changed the growing movement of the followers of Christ. Indeed, these things that have happened are more than just experiences, they are disturbances in Peter’s life and his understanding of himself as a man and a believer and follower of Christ. This is because Peter and the growing movement of Christ followers are being visited by one of the most disturbing forces know to human beings: the Holy Spirit.

Yes, that’s right: the Holy Spirit is nothing if not deeply disturbing of our habits, and our traditions. Very often, the Spirit will even up-end our current realities.

Let me unpack that a little bit:

You and I have been hearing the story of Jesus every Sunday we gather together. It is the story we have known, read, and heard proclaimed for most of our lives. It is, therefore, second nature for us to think of the Christian church as having been around forever. Indeed, we are inclined to refer to Peter and the others as Christians even before this episode happened for them, the episode in the Book of Acts.

That is: they were not yet Christians until this time. Neither did they think of themselves as Christian, not yet. They knew themselves to be followers of Jesus Christ, *and* they knew themselves to be Jews, just as Jesus had been a Jew.

For all of the time Jesus was walking through the holy lands around Jerusalem with the disciples, he and they were still Jews. This is an important aspect that we need to remember. They had spent all of their lives as Jews; all of their lives attending synagogue and/or Temple, celebrating the high holy days in Jerusalem when they could, and keeping kosher and the rest of Mosaic Law.

Peter and the other Jewish followers of Christ probably thought they would remain Jews their whole lives; would continue to follow all of the traditions and customs that had grown-up around and within Judaism. Their faith, and the way they practiced it, the way they experienced it, was a way of life for them and for the rest of the Jewish community. While there may have been variations according to regional interpretation and belief, it was (and is) a culture almost as much as it is a faith practice.

Then, here in this chapter, in the Book of Acts, chapter 10, Peter has a couple of experiences that changes everything.

First, we are told about a Roman centurion named Cornelius who is a good and devout God follower. Cornelius has a mystical experience in his home in Caesarea (which is modern day Haifa). In a vision, Cornelius is blessed for his faithfulness and compassion, and he is instructed to send for Peter. The angel in his vision tells him that Peter is in Joppa, that he is staying in the house of another man, who was a tanner, and that Peter’s name was originally Simon. So, Cornelius sends men to invite Peter to his home.

As the emissaries get near to where he is staying, Peter has a vision of his own. In it, God shows him all of the animals, which, by dietary laws, are forbidden to him. To even touch one of them (let alone *eat* them) is to be made unclean.

And yet, what God says to Peter is *“Kill and eat”* [v.13]

Being a good and observant Jew, Peter demurs. He even protests. *“By no means,”* he says to the Lord. By no means will he ever eat something deemed unclean. He says this several times. [v.14]

Then God says something to him that is truly amazing. God says, *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”* [v.15]

Now let us stop there and think about this a little (before we consider the part of the chapter that was actually read for this morning).

As I said earlier, Peter and the other disciples were good, observant Jews. Therefore, Peter’s reaction to God’s presentation of all of the animals that were considered unclean was really quite natural. To reject them was deeply engrained in his mind, really in his whole being. Indeed, it was not just that these animals were forbidden by the law and custom, I cannot help but believe that to even contemplate eating something he had regarded all his life as unclean would probably have made his stomach turn. So, this vision was extraordinary—which is to say: “unsettling,” even disturbing.

After the vision, Peter does something he might not have done before the vision. He receives the Gentile men sent by Cornelius. Instead of being surprised or even hesitant about going with them, he welcomes them into the house where he is staying, and he picks up and he goes with them the next day. Not only him, but several of his friends go along too—*they* have not received the vision that he has, but they, too, go-along the approximately 35-mile trip to Caesarea. Once there, Peter enters Cornelius’ home and begins to preach to him, and his whole household. He preaches to them about Jesus Christ—his life, his death, and his resurrection, and what it was all about.

This is where this morning’s reading picks up: as Peter is speaking, as he is preaching, the Holy Spirit breaks into the story causing Cornelius and his household to display some of the very same traits as the Jews who were baptized with the Spirit on Pentecost morning—which was to say they spoke in tongues, and praised God.

If Peter had not already seen this happen to a group of Jews earlier, he might have been too afraid to understand what was going on, on that morning with Cornelius.

And that is another aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit: it is powerful—even to the point of being frightening sometimes. The Spirit is not some gentle breeze wafting in on a quiet afternoon. The Holy Spirit comes rushing in to dislodge us from habits, customs, even the traditions we have grown used to practicing. The Spirit *has* to be this strong because few of us give-up old patterns of life with some kind of decisive event—ask anyone who has tried to go on a diet.

Suddenly, Peter realizes why and how God has prepared him for this moment, and he arranges for Cornelius and his whole household to be baptized in Jesus’ name. So, all of the forty-three verses before the ones we heard this morning (from the Book of Acts) were necessary for those last five to conclude the way they did. And make no mistake: what the Spirit did in that moment was nothing short of an earthquake in the lives of Peter and the other Jews who came with him from Joppa.

Up until that moment, they probably did not imagine their faith-life would ever include Gentiles. Before Peter’s vision, *he* would not even have gone into the house of a Gentile, let alone baptize one in Jesus’ name, but now here they all were together.

The passage we heard today was very brief, but it communicated so very, very much and I hope none of us missed any of it because it is so important for us to hear and to take seriously. Let me put that another way: Nu’uanu Congregational Church, pay close attention to this story. Read it again and again because God is speaking directly to us today. *This story is our story!*

In the reading we heard, in the blink of an eye, God has torn down old barriers and has opened new doors for Peter and all of the disciples and all of the people who have come to follow Christ in the intervening centuries—even for us, here in this church. God’s Holy Spirit has broken down barriers in order to free people to live together as brothers and sisters; to help and care for one another.

The important thing for us to remember is that in this amazing and blessed work of barrier breaking and reconciliation, the disturbance we may experience is not meant to frighten us. It is only meant to engulf us in God’s love. It is only meant to make known to us the power and immensity of God’s love, and that all of his power and limitlessness love is ours as a free gift.

The second thing I hope you will remember is that we will not go through this experience without God’s guidance and preparation. We will receive everything we need to meet the adventure of mission and compassion with strength and capacity. And if we should come to the end of our own strength, God’s Spirit will be with us to comfort, inspire, and encourage us, and we know all of this because of these few short verses that we heard this morning, and because of the whole of the story of Jesus Christ, our Savior who strengthens us even in this moment, and in all of our lives.

I pray that this will be a truth that you pray in your own heart. Amen.