FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Disordering Faith”* Acts 11:1-18

Although our observance of Pentecost is still a few weeks ahead of us, Peter and the disciples have already had that amazing experience. He and the others have seen the descent of the Holy Spirit, which caused the disciples and believers to begin to speak—each of them—in the language of their own country. Even though there were individuals from a variety of countries who were in Jerusalem for the festival, each was able to perfectly understand the other—even while each spoke their own language.

The Spirit had eliminated the division that language can cause between peoples making it possible for them to come together, to share their thoughts and their hearts. They were able to share their faith.

Clearly, one might surmise, God’s objective in the world has something to do with healing the divisions between peoples. If so, language is an important start. And so, as Peter, the disciples, and many others watched, God brought down another barrier between peoples, and all of the Jews were able to celebrate together, equally and in perfect understanding.

In the chapter before today’s lesson, and which he carefully describes to the other disciples in this morning’s lesson, Peter has had another such experience of God’s Spirit coming into his life and dismantling old practices and divisions. This time it has to do with food.

As we heard, Peter has had a vision concerning certain kinds of food that has been forbidden for observant, obedient Jews to eat. Shellfish, and certain types of animals and birds—all of the creatures described in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are considered unclean and are therefore, prohibited. This has been true for them for centuries. It is an important aspect of their identity and faith practice.

And if it were just a prohibition about eating these things, that would be difficult enough. However, these things that were not considered acceptable to eat could also make the consumer unclean—that is: people who ate such foods would be unable to have fellowship with the rest of the observant community. They were also prohibited from coming to worship with the rest of the community.

An unclean person was also unfit to be in company with others.

A person who had been so tainted by eating unclean food or had been in close quarters with someone who had eaten it, would have to partake of the required rituals of cleansing in order to return to fellowship with the rest of the community.

In a place and a time in history where hospitality, table fellowship, and sharing bread with others was so important, this added a formidable boundary between the Israelites and their neighbors. This is because it was more than a physical boundary between countries. The dietary laws could also be interpreted as a social/moral distinction. To have to refuse to eat or even to be physically close to someone who has consumed unclean food makes such people exceptional, but it also limits with whom you are able to be in intimate and trusting relationships.

That is why, when the disciples and believers hear that Peter has shared the good news with a *Roman*, and has even stayed a few days in his house, it is actually the latter part of that news that shakes them to the core. It was the eating and being in a Gentile’s house that made them uncomfortable.

On the one hand, it is admirable that the disciples did not find sharing the Gospel with non-Jews to be objectionable. It is actually commendable that the thought of the news about Christ going out into all sorts of communities is not a stumbling block for them.

However, we can only wonder what such a church would have been like, what *our* church would have been like, if it was fine to *tell* others that God loved them, but it was not acceptable to break bread with them. What kind of community could have been built if it was permissible to gather people together to *hear* a message of grace, but it was still not acceptable to hold their hand or draw near to them when death or other sorrow came to them. Nor could the Jewish Christians have received or welcomed comfort and caring from a Gentile.

Peter’s visit at Cornelius’ house seems to have attracted the same kind of attention Jesus did when he ate with tax collectors and other sinners. Jesus sought out those on the margins. He sat and he ate with them. He taught them about God’s love. He drew close and welcomed them.

This was shocking for people during his ministry. It was disorienting because what Jesus was doing was pushing back against the barriers of exclusion. Sometimes, he broke them altogether.

This is what has happened with Peter. He has brought Cornelius and his family into the faith, *and* he has socialized with them in the same way that he would have a Jewish family.

The rest of the disciples were astounded—did the Gentiles really have a place in this fellowship gathered around Christ? And if so, what was this going to do to their lives as they had known it?

Luckily, Peter’s vision had come upon him powerfully. In an instant, it had transformed Peter’s whole lifetime of practice and tradition. God’s message had come to him so forcefully and so completely that he was able to obey when God called him to minister to Cornelius and his whole household.

No more hesitation. No more protestation about unclean things. Peter’s actions and his testimony to the others was decisive and purposeful. God was doing another new thing. What else could Peter do but be faithful to God’s calling?

That is the problem with our faith: we are always being called out, always being *led* out to new places and new habits of culture and communion. And this *sounds* really great…until you actually come face-to-face with the realities that this brings like: people with different customs, different language, different skin color,…different food.

It is disorienting to start doing things differently. Think of how infuriating it is when someone puts something out of place in your own home. Peter’s actions are like that, but for the whole of his community.

But that is the thing about new life with Christ—it requires taking things out of the order that *we* have put things in and re-doing our life—re-ordering it—according to the requirements of God’s radically generous love. It is a love that leads us out where we are to find more and more people. It is not an easy thing to do because we have to put aside a lot of what we know; even a lot of what looks like safety and security.

About twenty-five years ago, this church was one of the founding members of FACE, and one of the first actions we did was to join with the residents of Kuhio Park Terrace as they faced the renovation of their homes. This was a good thing and long overdue. However, there was a real threat that *after* the renovation the rents were going to go up far beyond the reach of the current residents.

FACE gathered, trained and organized people from all of the member churches. We were Protestant and Catholic, Jewish and Buddhist—many different faiths and ethnicities. Together, we were a force that could not be ignored, and we asked for and received assurances that the current residents would be able to afford their newly refurbished apartments.

At the time, a large number of the residents were Samoan, and many were members of a Roman Catholic Church pastored by a young Samoan priest. I no longer remember his name (or even the name of the church that he pastored). All that I remember is that the quality of life for many families, many of the families in that congregation were at risk. Now, you and I could have stood on the sidelines wringing our hands and saying, “tsk, tsk, what a shame,” or we could do what we did—we joined them, we organized, and we advocated with them.

I also remember what their priest said to his congregation at the end of the whole action that we did, our celebratory gathering. He said to them: “I have been your pastor for a long time, now, and through all of this time I have done my best to keep us all together—to keep us safe from the ‘outside.’ But after this, I now see that God wants us to go forth into *new* pastures, new hope, new life.”

What the priest and his congregation had found in FACE was a broader community of people who did not want to talk *at* them, but to join *with* them. We were able to show them—*and ourselves*—what it was like to be in mission *with* other people. What we were able to do was to come together as one people who wanted the same thing for *all* our families—a safe, secure place to live and grow. This is what God will always be working on in the world around us.

And in the face of new life that brings security, dignity, hope, and joy to more and more people, both Peter and the young priest cannot help but point to what *God* is doing in the world as their explanation for their actions. God is always finding a way to push out the barriers that we have placed between us and others. God is always leading us out into bigger pastures and larger horizons.

Will this journey with God be confusing and disordering? Will we sometimes struggle to “keep up” with God.

The answer is, yes. However, our good news is that God will not give up on us as we struggle and question, even as we doubt and try to turn away. Our good news is that God will send visions and visionaries, will send leaders and prophets and other people who will help us to see what they have seen: God’s beloved community marching forward toward, dismantling obstacles, and holding out a hand of unity and compassion.

And so, this is my prayer for us: that we will look for those ways in which God is leading us out, and that we will go willingly and gratefully, praising God, and looking forward.

May this be so. Amen.