**4 Easter**

**April 17, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

During our Easter season our first reading is always from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The author of Acts is the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The two books are like a two-volume set: one tells of the life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus; the second volume, the Book of Acts, tells the story of the early church. The Book of Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome. The story begins with a tiny and fearful sect of Jews huddled behind closed doors in their sacred city; it ends with a vibrant movement in the capital city of one the greatest empires in history. The final sentence of Acts describes how in Rome Paul preached the good news of God's love "boldly and without hindrance" for two years.

The portion of Acts that we read this morning marks a transition in the author’s narrative, where he ends one section and begins another. The author does this several times in the Book of Acts by summarizing how the Jesus movement was spreading like wild fire. He writes, "then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.” The author then pivots from Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus which we heard about last week to Peter's conversion in the house of Simon the tanner.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 of the Book of Acts mark a major turning point for this early Jesus movement. At the beginning of Chapter 9, the man who would later take the name Paul was known by the name Saul, and Saul was persecuting those who were involved in this Jesus movement. But then Saul was blinded in that remarkable incident on the road to Damascus. It was his conversion to this new expression of the faith. He changed his name from Saul to Paul, and then Paul went on to become a central figure in the early Jesus movement.

But Paul wasn’t the only character in the Book of Acts involved in this movement. Another giant was Peter … Peter, the impetuous disciple of Jesus who was always quick with an answer, but who had denied Jesus three times after Jesus was arrested. Peter was such a dominate figure in the early church that he later became the first Bishop of Rome … the first Pope. But we get way ahead of ourselves. In Chapter 9 of the book of Acts Peter was still struggling to find his place. According to the text he “went here and there among the believers” as if he had no clear direction. In his wanderings Peter visited Joppa … modern day Tel Aviv. Perhaps you remember the city of Joppa. About 800 years before Peter went there, Joppa was the seaport city where Jonah "fled from the Lord" because as a Jew he was repulsed at God's call to preach to the pagan Ninevites. The author of Acts now puts Peter in this same city. He gives Peter a similar call. Only Peter didn't make the same mistake as Jonah.

The story we heard this morning is really about raising a widow named Tabitha from the dead. But the last sentence includes a revealing detail: "Meanwhile he [Peter] stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner." When the author begins a new story about a Roman solider named Cornelius just a few sentences later, he repeats himself: "Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter, who is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." And then, just in case you missed it, one page later the author writes a third time: "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner."

Why might this be so important? The reason is that “Simon the tanner” would have been an outcast. He would have been a social castaway and a religious outsider. He would have been living on the margins of society. He was a "dirty" man in both a literal and figurative sense. Tanners worked with dead animals. The filth and the stench must have been horrible. Just imagine how Simon looked and smelled at the end of a hot day. He would have been the object of social disdain. Almost anyone would have felt superior to him. But Simon the tanner had joined the Jesus movement, and found an acceptance there that society never gave him.

Simon the tanner was also a religious outsider. His story shows how the early believers struggled with Jewish laws about ritual purity as Gentiles joined their movement. And to me this is the crux of the issue. This is why these chapters in the book of Acts are so important. Peter was Jewish, just like Paul. But Peter had been one of the disciples of Jesus. He was there when Jesus taught about the kingdom of God … a world the way it would look if God was in charge. And he was there when Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors. He was there when Jesus touched and healed lepers. He was there when Jesus accepted the unacceptable, included those who had been excluded, and embraced those deemed “unclean” by the religious authorities. If this is what the kingdom of God looked like, then it was a far cry from the social and religious norms that were in place.

And now the new Jesus movement had to deal with these issues. If the people in this Jesus movement were to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then they had to include those who had been excluded … and that meant Gentiles. But did the Gentiles have to become Jews first? Did the Gentiles have to keep kosher as the Jews that were part of the Jesus movement did? That Peter was staying in the home of Simon the tanner, who was an outcast, shows that Peter had come to understand in his heart and soul how to live as if God’s kingdom had already come.

It was while Peter was living at the home of Simon the tanner that he had a vision. We will hear about that vision in next week’s reading from Acts. The story is told just a few verses after the end of today’s reading. Peter was hungry and while waiting for some food he fell into a trance. He saw a large sheet coming down from heaven, being held by unknown hands in the four corners, and in the sheet were “all kinds of four-footed creatures, and reptiles, and birds of the air.” Then he heard a voice, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice came again, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And this happened three times.

Peter, a Jew who had always kept kosher in what he ate, was being told by the Lord that whatever God made must be clean … it was not up to Peter, or anyone else for that matter, to deem it ritually “unclean” or profane. In the portion that will be read next Sunday, from Chapter 11, Peter is criticized for eating with Gentiles, and he tells the story of the vision he had as a justification for including Gentiles at his table … in the eyes of God everyone is the same. If every animal is made by God and is deemed by God to be “good,” then certainly every human being, created in God’s image, must also be “good” and worthy of inclusion.

This was a turning point for Peter, and it was a turning point for the early Jesus movement. It meant that the Jesus movement had to be open to all comers. The Jesus movement wasn’t open only to Jews just because Jesus was a Jew. And Gentiles didn’t need to become Jewish before they could be part of the movement … the men didn’t need to be circumcised, and they didn’t need to keep kosher. Interestingly, Paul’s letters are full of this discussion among the peoples of those early church communities in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus.

But this egalitarian inclusivity … as opposed to a hierarchal exclusivity … is a lesson that has to be learned in every generation. For 2,000 years it has been learned and forgotten, and then relearned … and forgotten again. Our society, our culture, our religious institutions all have a hierarchy of purity. There are always those who are fully included in the Church, and those who not. There are those at the top, and those at the bottom. There are the haves, and the have-nots. Yet Jesus in his lifetime included those who were excluded and on the margin. He made no distinction between the Syro-Phonecian woman with the sick daughter … a pagan, and Bartimaeus the blind beggar who was Jewish. He treated the Samaritan woman at the well who had multiple husbands … clearly an outsider … the same as he treated the Jewish man who was born lame. They were all children of God. They all needed to be included … and so Jesus included them. That is what Peter came to understand, and slowly the rest of the Jesus movement came to the same understanding. But it did not last very long.

Today the Church still participates in a distinction between who to include and who not to include. But it doesn’t have to be that way, and according to Jesus, it shouldn’t be that way. Jesus said that in God’s kingdom there would be an egalitarian inclusivity based upon radical hospitality. Everyone was the same in the eyes of God. Peter came to understand that while living in the home of Simon the tanner. Peter took seriously what Jesus took seriously about God’s kingdom, and he did what he could to begin living as if it were true. Twenty centuries later we can do the same. We can include the excluded. We can make room for the marginalized. We can practice radical hospitality … here in this community of faith.

And if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then this egalitarian inclusivity has to happen in our hearts and souls as well as in our common life. If we are to practice radical hospitality in our community of faith then we must begin to practice radical hospitality in our personal lives as well. And then we need to take the same transformational step that Peter took to seek lodging with Simon the tanner … the one who needed to be included more than anyone else.

Amen.