

## *Peter's Conversion*

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Eagle River, Wisconsin  
May 19, 2019

Dale L. Bishop

Text: Acts 11:1-18

Back in the day, when I was Middle East executive for our church, I made a visit to Lebanon that was crazy. There are lots of things that I did when I served in that capacity that look crazy in retrospect, but this one even looked crazy at the time. The country was torn apart by civil war and was still reeling from the Israeli invasion of 1982 that had destroyed most of what remained of its infrastructure. To make matters worse, after a hijacking of a TWA jetliner and the murder of an American passenger, Beirut's airport was shut down both by an international boycott and by continued fighting around the airport. Lebanon was cut off from the rest of the world, and if the people of Lebanon were feeling isolated, the Christians of Lebanon were feeling especially isolated. So, at the invitation of the Armenian Patriarch, or Catholicos, a saintly man whom I was privileged to call "friend," I, along with two colleagues from the National Council of Churches, made a visit of accompaniment. We never presumed that the visit would materially change the dire situation our partners faced, but these friends were in a kind of prison, and we Christians are called to visit the prisoners. So we went.

We traveled from Cyprus to Beirut in a Lebanese Army helicopter arranged by the Catholicos, landing on a small makeshift helipad that had been created from a section of a then unusable highway in East Beirut, the so-called Christian sector. From there we visited as many church leaders in that part of the city as the

situation would allow. In gratitude for our foolhardiness, our friends invited us to a traditional Lebanese dinner, high in the mountains overlooking a ruined Beirut. Despite the war and all its privations, the Lebanese never surrendered their appreciation of good food. But their definition of good food stretched our culinary horizons somewhat. This particular meal consisted of the usual kebabs and tabbouli and hummus and baba ghannouj and stuffed grape leaves, all of which I love, but the *piece de resistance*, the delicacy that provoked moans of delight from our Lebanese hosts were these little birds that had been fried in oil. I remember looking at the bird that was plopped onto my plate: it was the whole bird, such as it was, with its little head and little eyes and beak, its feet, its elaborate bone structure, and precious little meat. The feathers were a part of the batter.

But, I thought, “When in Beirut,” and I sucked it up or rather, sucked it in. I popped that little bird into my mouth, and then chewed it—my teeth crunched those little bones--and then I gulped it down before I could give it more thought. I remember that it didn’t taste like chicken. After dinner, when I conferred with my American colleagues, I learned that they had taken the wise coward’s way out: one little bird had somehow landed in a potted plant; another in a wastebasket. I, on the other hand, had bravely eaten what I previously would have considered “inedible.”

Today’s lesson from the Book of Acts has to do with Peter doing the unimaginable and eating what he thought was inedible, even if it was just in a dream. Peter, a faithful and observant Jew, had a vision. In his vision he saw a large sheet, something like a tablecloth, descending from heaven, and on that sheet were an assortment of animals that Jews were forbidden to eat. “Kill and eat!” was the instruction from heaven; and Peter objected. This wasn’t just a matter of taste; it was a matter of taboo. Probably in Peter’s very observant Jewish mind the two

were the same. But Peter was obedient in his dream. We aren't told that he gagged at the thought of eating these things, but it's a reasonable guess that he did.

It's a strange story, really, until we put it into context. The early Christian community was composed primarily of Jews. These people weren't even called Christians yet—they called themselves “people of the Way.” They didn't consider themselves to be adherents of a separate religion, but rather were still, for the most part, a movement within Judaism. But the risen Christ they followed had not been bound by sectarianism. He had, deliberately, breached the boundaries around Judaism. He had eaten with, healed, and even praised the faith of non-Jews, of Gentiles, people who weren't just “outsiders” but hated outsiders: Romans and Samaritans, for example. The arc of the faith that Jesus lived and professed bent inexorably toward inclusion: toward an openness that must have been shocking even to people who were attracted to his teachings.

His followers struggled with what to do with Jesus' radical teaching and practice of inclusion. They had come part way: they accepted the conversion of Gentiles to the faith, something that was possible under Judaism, but difficult. Being accepted into the Jewish community required an act of purification, conforming to Jewish rites, including circumcision for the men, and following Jewish laws, notably Jewish dietary laws. The followers of Jesus were willing to open the door even wider. They were willing not only to accept converts, but also to seek them. But the old boundaries separating Jews from non-Jews remained in place. “You can join us, and we hope you will join us,” potential Gentile converts were told, “but you have to become like us.” That, sadly, is where the church is too often stuck today. We want diversity, as long as people are just like us.

But here's the significance of Peter's dream: in Peter's dream the final barrier in the Christian community between Jews and non-Jews, between insiders and

outsiders, was to come down. Non-Jews didn't have to become Jews to join the community of Jesus' followers. The thing is, though, that Peter's dream, which he later reported to a previously skeptical council of church elders in Jerusalem, wasn't the real revelation; it was merely preparation for, and confirmation of, a revelation that was to come to Peter in a human encounter. The real revelation came not in the wispy recollections of a fleeting dream, but in the flesh and blood of a human being—a most unlikely vehicle of truth, a Roman centurion, a Gentile and, yes, an occupier and an enemy. That's the rest of the story. In fact, I think it's the real story.

We're told that Cornelius, that Roman centurion, was a devout man who feared God, and gave alms generously. Cornelius himself had a vision of an angel. The angel told him to seek out Peter, who was then living in Joppa, near present-day Tel Aviv. When the two finally met, in Cornelius' home, Peter told him that though it was unlawful for him to associate with a Gentile, God had shown Peter that he shouldn't call anyone profane or unclean. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." That was Peter's real revelation, a revelation that, like our own most powerful revelations, came not from reading a book or listening to a sermon, or even having a dream, but from human experience, or from experience of the human. Peter's dream explained and confirmed the revelation he had already received in his embrace of someone who had previously been in the category of "other," even of "enemy."

I want to share my own Peter and Cornelius moment. I actually was reluctant to put it in this sermon because it really doesn't reflect well on me at a particular point in my life, but it seems apt, and confession will be good for my soul. When I was a graduate student at Columbia University in New York City, the Upper West Side of Manhattan, now a very fashionable neighborhood, was considered to be,

and was, a dangerous neighborhood. Two groups of people, one group consisting of mostly white and relatively affluent students, the other of African-Americans from Harlem, lived rather uneasily together. There were all sorts of disparities between these two groups, and where there is that kind of disparity there often is also crime. During those days at Columbia, the prime topic of conversation at student gatherings was the latest mugging.

I lived in a building whose security system would today be considered laughable. There were two doors at the entry: the first was always open; the inner door required one to have a key or for someone from inside to physically open the door. There was no intercom or buzzer system to let someone in. Most often an elevator operator was the one who opened the door for someone without a key. The person seeking entrance to the building, after coming in the first open door would push a buzzer, and an elevator operator would, if he was satisfied that the visitor was safe, open that locked door. All of us tenants were instructed not to allow someone to follow us into the building if we didn't know that person. Truth be told, if the person was white, and looked respectable, we would let them in without asking a question.

One evening, as I entered the building, a young African-American man followed me in. I quickly opened the inner door with my key and closed it in the face of the guy who had come in behind me. When I got into the elevator, the buzzer was going off insistently. The elevator man, an elderly African-American, went to the door, and let in the fellow I had slammed the door on. He knew him. And so, there I stood, embarrassed, in the elevator, when this young man joined me. He looked at me closely, and then said, "You have no idea how often doors have been slammed in my face." And he was right. I had no idea. You see, I should have at least engaged the man before I assumed the worst about him. My response was automatic, largely because of the color of his skin. I learned something that night.

I had a revelation. It was a revelation mostly about myself, and it wasn't a happy learning, but I learned something as well about how it must feel to be an outsider, one about whom the worst is always assumed. It was a harsh conversion experience for me, but it changed me, although further change is always possible and probably needed.

The encounter between Peter and Cornelius is sometimes referred to as the "conversion of Cornelius." I think that a more apt description is, "the conversion of Peter." After he met Cornelius, Peter looked at the world and at God in a new way. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." The question for us is whether we are open to our own conversion, to our own turning to God, to our own discovery of what is divine in those flesh-and-blood revelations that God is faithfully and forever sending our way.

That's why this communion table is so important. All of us, saints and sinners alike, regardless of who we are or how much we know, how much money we have, what we've done and what we haven't done—all of us are called to this table to taste, once again, the grace of God. We come here not because we must, but because we want to, because we need to feel the presence of God in our lives, and we do that best in the companionship of others. Come, taste and see how gracious the Lord is. Amen.