

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Easter 5 (15 May 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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Collect

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 11:1-18, Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35, Psalm 148

Shock and Awe in Acts

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

In nomine patris...

In our first reading today, Peter does something truly surprising, shocking, and scandalous. Something totally taboo. The other believers in Jesus are just aghast that he would do something like this. They're asking Peter for an explanation about why he would go visit uncircumcised men, that is, non-Jewish people, and even eat with them! The horror!

It's easy to poke fun at these believers 2000 years later. We have much more democratic views about eating with others. Maybe. Segregated lunch counters are not that far in our past!

Even Peter we can laugh at because he required not one but *three* separate visions, with voices from heaven, to convince him to at least consider the thing that God was already doing without his help. That's how far out in left field God's instruction to Peter was, how unimaginable. Interacting with, sharing intimate table fellowship with, *those people* was just unimaginable for any Jewish person. There was a strong, culturally supported, long-established habit of prejudice that precluded any such mixing of the races. And here was God: smashing everything Peter thought he knew about right and wrong, instead demanding *inclusion*.

A Wedding

I had a similar experience some years ago in Texas. A seminary friend was getting married. To another woman. I hadn't even known she was gay! And gay marriage wasn't legal in Texas. I wasn't sure how *I* felt about gay marriage. But she was our friend, so of course Becky and I attended.

Here's the thing that struck me. Pretty much every other person at that wedding was gay. And they were all Christians. By and large they were conservative Christians. And they all had stories of being hurt by their churches. By Christ's church. But their dedication to Christ was stronger than the emotional and spiritual injuries they had sustained from their churches. And I was moved by that.

As a white, straight, cis, American male, it's pretty easy for me to be a Christian. From a purely practical standpoint, the hardest part may be in choosing to arrange my schedule to preserve an hour or so for church each week. I can do that. But here I met a community of people who were excluded, ostracized, discriminated against and the object of prejudice by their fellow Christians. And while this hurt them, it did not stop them from pursuing a passionate, vital relationship with Christ.

That day was when I heard another key piece of God's call that led me to the Episcopal Church. Not only was I determined to find a church that would practice gender equality. (We'll get to that in a minute.) I was also determined to find a church that would welcome and embrace the ministry of these fellow believers I met at my friend's wedding. God used that community that day to smash one more thoughtless prejudice I carried, demanding I develop a greater vision of inclusion.

ECW

Today is ECW Sunday. ECW does not stand for "Extreme Championship Wrestling." Instead, the Episcopal Church Women is an organization begun in the Episcopal Church in 1871 to champion women's rights. At that time, even in the Church, women and girls were not permitted to serve in positions of leadership. They could not serve on Vestry or as wardens. They could not be ordained as clergy. They were not given any official positions of authority and responsibility.

But the women of the Episcopal Church were not going to let that stop them! They had faith, and they were determined to bring that faith to expression in their collective action. So the ECW was born as a vehicle by which to accomplish their faith goals.

This might lead some to ask whether the ECW is still relevant today. We have women as Bishops, Presiding Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Vestry-*men*, and Senior and Junior Wardens. Women have attained equality, right?

It happens that we live in a world, and in a church, where women still suffer inequality and discrimination. It's still easier for me to get a higher-paying job than my female colleague who is otherwise my equal in education, experience, age, and ability. God has worked and continues to work through the ECW to smash gender-based prejudices even in the Episcopal Church, demanding a greater vision of respect and inclusion.

God's Politics

These are all political stories, aren't they?

Peter is dealing with "the race question."

I was confronted with “the gay question.”

The ECW is a response to “the women’s question.”

But these questions are not the concerns just of those who race racial discrimination, sexual discrimination, or gender discrimination. In each of these instances, it is God who has intervened to bring change into the world. It is God who has a special concern for those who suffer. It is God who is incarnate in Jesus, born into a minority population in the world.

Politics is about how we live together in community. What is the most important commandment? What is the second like unto it? Christianity is totally centered on a *political slogan*: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What is Jesus’ new commandment in today’s Gospel passage? “Love one another.” Because that’s how they’ll know you’re Christians. That is a political commandment, a commitment of how we will live with one another.

Christian discipleship is political but Christian discipleship is not *partisan*: Jesus criticized *all* the parties: Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, Herodians, and Romans. Jesus criticized them by name! None of the parties could match God’s vision for the world, and they all deserved criticism. That remains true today. But Christianity is very much political, very much about joining Jesus in Jesus’ mission of reconciliation and liberation for everyone.

The God of the Bible has a particular concern for those whose lives are impacted by discrimination based on gender, race, age, sexual orientation, political affiliation, or any other imaginary line you want to draw in the sand. When these distinctions we make have real, material impacts on people’s lives, whether emotionally, economically, or what have you, then these are spiritual concerns. God sent Peter *three* separate visions to get him to finally cross a racial barrier.

While there remain glass ceilings, wage gaps, and promotion inequalities based on gender, advocating for women’s rights is a *spiritual exercise*. This includes the Episcopal Church’s position on reproductive rights, with formal resolutions stretching from 1976 to our most recent General Convention in 2018.

While there remain substantial health, wealth, housing, education, policing, and employment gaps based on race, we continue to affirm that Black Lives Matter.

While there remains discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, we continue to advocate for equality and inclusion.

Because that is the kind of God we serve. That is what it means to be followers of Christ. I have great sympathy for Peter, for the circumcised believers, for the apostle Paul: can you imagine the mind-boggling change in perspective they had to take to let go of their prejudices and assumptions and to join God’s mission instead? Or maybe it’s not too hard, because we’re called to the same thing in our own time and place!

Here’s the thing. You and I, for the most part, are Gentiles. We *were* the outsiders. God went to extreme measures to change that.

God is doing that for you and me today, too. And for every other person around us. We get to take part in that amazing, category-smashing work that God is doing in the world today.

As you stand *for* equality, *against* oppression, and *for* inclusion, you are standing for your own inclusion in the Kingdom of God. In the process, you are choosing to stand with Jesus.

Amen.