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“Even to Them?”

A sermon by Peter Hausmann

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

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Acts 11:1-18

How do you change your mind?

How do YOU let yourself be moved?

What would lead you to willingly turn your world upside down?

I think that sometimes when I am in this place. This beautiful, airy, staid, yet joyful room has been a set for a number of changes in my life. That balcony is where I sat for worship in the year after I switched careers midstream. This chancel is where I stood when I got re-married. That area is where I stood during my first Covenant Network Conference a number of years ago. That may have been the biggest change of them all, being at a Covenant Network Conference, a gathering of people who make space in the church locally and nationally for LGBTQ persons. Not such a big deal for y'all, with your long history of being a people of justice and inclusion. But for me, a former card-carrying conservative PCUSA

pastor, after years of going to opposite-of-Covenant-Network-Conferences where we strategized, prayed, and planned for how to keep the faith in the ways that we thought it had to be kept, lest it wither down and water down in the hands of “people who think like THAT;” here I was, standing in First Pres, thinking just like THAT. Finding my ways of thinking changing from rigidity to flexibility. From preservation to progression.

Prior to the conference held here. Prior to standing in that back pew, I WAS the people in Jerusalem that we meet in Acts 11 verse 1, interrogating Peter on his return from the mission field. WE hear that YOU were with not-Jewish people, breaking bread, and rubbing shoulders with THEM. The orthodoxy police were onto Peter, wondering if he wasn’t watering down the new-found faith. “Why did you go to the uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Us. Them. We. They. Insider. Outsider.

These Jerusalem Christians were quite used to knowing who was right and who was wrong. Their whole lives before Jesus were being the Jewish folk. The ones who set themselves apart from the world of their day by ritual, worship, sacrifice, and rhythms that kept the lines clear. They are they, we are we. But in the early days after resurrection, there was no church yet, there were barely even Christians. There were Jews who were trying to figure out how to be Jews who followed a rejected crucified, resurrected, and inclusive Rabbi. And there were not-Jews who

also wanted to follow that same Rabbi. Herein lies the conflict, can not-Jews become Christians without first becoming Jews?

Peter was feeling this tension keenly. As he began to move out from his old haunts, and encounter more not-Jews, he met persons who had the same zeal and energy and joy and patience that he had seen in the closest friends of Jesus. Who called this pattern of zeal and energy and joy and patience the Holy Spirit. But if your entire life you grow up hearing that “THEY,” whomever they are, are not the same as us. . . , If you grow up hearing in at your dining room table that THEY are shifty, lazy, or that THEY are backward, dangerous, and violent. . . , If you grow up in church hearing that THEY are the reason God sends hurricanes and destroys cities. . . , Or THEY are the reason the market crashed. If you come to believe that THEY are not-human, how would you ever come together with them at a table and share bread, and drink together?

Peter was struggling with how THEY could be not-human, not-Jew, yet be with and in Jesus too. His head was probably hurting. So in Acts 10, God decides to give Peter a nudge to move further out, God gives Peter a vision to set the stage for a new act, God’s paints a picture of a world right side up. Three times, in a dream-like trance, Peter sees something like a sheet being lowered from heaven with every sort of animal on it. Four footed animals beasts of prey reptiles birds of the

air. Clean and unclean. Permissible and abominable all on one great big gingham picnic blanket.

Imagine laying out a table cloth on your counter at home, and carefully placing on it your everyday china, your bottled beverages of choice, your steak, your cream cheese, your crackers, shrimp, chicken, berries, and oysters, banana pudding, and deviled eggs. Always got to have the deviled eggs. You carefully place all these on your cloth, then get someone else to grab the other two corners and you lift, separate, then snap all corners together in the middle, knot them together like a hobo suitcase and force it all into your cooler to take to Duke Gardens for a lovely repast. Once you get there, you lift it out, and in reverse order, untie, stretch, and lower it onto the grass. TADA!!!! A royal mess.

Broken plates, shattered glass, mayonnaise and cheese and pudding and shrimp salad mixed in with your brisket. Not only is it a mess, but your kosher friends can't even pick through it to salvage a meal, because the shrimp you meant to keep for yourself is there, and according to Old Testament law they can't eat that. And the milk and cheese, the byproduct of the cow can't be mixed with the meat of the cow. It's all just ruined. For them and for you.

This is what happens in Peter's vision. Clean and unclean, perfectly separated beforehand, are jumbled together when the corners of the sheet are lifted up. And granted, once lowered down, the animals with the cloven hooves can walk away from those with, so that Peter, a good Jew could sort them out. But the add-on laws of the day said that it is not enough to not eat the unclean, but if anything unclean, or rather, if anyONE unclean touches another, then they are all alike unclean. A good Jew shaking the hand of a not-Jew, becomes, for a while at least, as good as an abomination. Barbara Brown Taylor struggles to help us imagine the shock of this for Peter in her Feasting on the Word Commentary series, writing:

I wish there were some way we could understand how important dietary law has been to the people of Israel. Most of us have eaten bacon all our lives, and we do not think twice about combining milk and meat, but if we were first century Jews, the very thought would make us break out in a cold sweat. It would be like coming to church one morning to find pork chops and whiskey on the altar instead of bread and wine

We can hear that in Peter's response to the voice of God in the vision, "Get up Peter, kill and eat. But I replied by no means Lord for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But God responds, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" What God has made clean, you must not call profane." [To the congregation, ask] Who here is a good Jew? Who here is a gentile? Can you

hear the good news in that word from God, coupled with this jumbled up world in a sheet vision? God has made all this mess clean. God has made us clean. God has made you, clean.

Peter gets it. Peter's head lifts up. Its as if his skull is expanded so there is room for . . .for us in his new way, in the church built upon his shoulders.

Peter's three-peat vision sets the stage for action. No sooner does the sheet get lifted up to heaven than he gets a knock on the door to go to the house of a not-Jew, gentile, Roman, Cornelius. This is like a trifecta of THEM. Gentile. Unclean. Roman. Occupier. Soldier. Oppressor. What would people think of Peter if he went in. Doesn't matter to the new Peter, he goes in whole hog, if you will and makes no distinction between us and them.

Have you ever held your breath as you took a big step? Changed jobs, just before you told your boss you were leaving? Ended a relationship, where do I start? Starting a relationship. Medical decision for another. Some steps are like stepping off into the nothingness. Imagine Peter at the threshold of the Roman. Gentile. Soldier. Deep breath, step in. Embrace. Listen. Learn. EAT, for God's sake, eating there!!!

We keep our own distances. So much of our lives, even in church, can be about that, finding our WEness over and against them. Someone else, anyone will do

really: Liberals, Conservatives, Rednecks, vegans, any of these words we can say with shade in our voice to let folks know who's camp WE are in. Praise music. North Durham. East Durham. Southpoint. And then the most grievous, Raleigh. Black. White. Rich. Poor. Whatever. Whomever. We divide divide divide. What God has made clean you must not call profane. EVEN THEM.

Will you this week, along with me, experiment with a journal of othering? A discipline of noticing? Set an intention to pay attention to the times you yourself consciously or unconsciously divide yourselves from others. What passes through your mind as you hand a panhandler money? What are your feelings as you grit your teeth writing a response to an accusatory email from a client? What fantasies do you hold in your heart when you see a politician you do not like? What case do you build against a loved one when they disappoint you again? How do you feel when you unfriend someone on Face book?

Notice, observe, pay attention to how often we make someone else not like us, how often we deepen divisions at the micro level rather than find a place to connect. Jesus comes to connect, connect, connect. In the cross Jesus reveals to us that were all on the same level, we are all alike, scared of death, scared of change, scared of anything that threatens the way it's always been. In the vision, the Holy Spirit reminds Peter that this kind of scared is a denial of God's very purpose in the world. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Believe, breathe, cross that threshold toward THEM in the name of God

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