

“VISIONS: III – PETER SAW A SHEET”

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Acts 10

When Michael Tavinor was a young child, he had a best friend by the name of John. They were exactly the same age, in fact, they were born on the same day in 1953. They had that and a lot more in common, but one thing they didn't have in common was their church – Michael and his family were Baptist, John and his family Roman Catholic. Michael remembers that John would never step foot inside the Baptist Church, but if he (Michael) was out with John's family they would take him along with them into the Catholic Church. Of course, once in there, there were certain things he could and could not do. Like receive communion.

One day, Michael asked John what that gold thing on the wall was, and John replied that it was called “the tabernacle.” While the mass was going on, Michael was flipping through the mass book when he came upon a glossary of terms, and there found the word “tabernacle.” So he read it, and this is what it said: “A receptacle for keeping safe the Holy Sacrament – it must be secured with a key to keep its contents from the hands of the profane and heretics.”

Not quite knowing what that meant, Michael asked John what a heretic was. He said he didn't know, but would ask his mother. The next time they met up, John said to Michael, “Well, I asked my Mom your question.” “What question?” Michael replied. “You know, you asked me ‘what is a heretic?’” “Oh yeah, and what did she say?”

And looking right into Michael's eyes, John said, “You are, and so is your whole family.” (On-line, Michael Tavinor, 9/16/13)

You know, I probably would have been more shocked to hear that story had I not heard stories myself from my mother about her growing up with a Roman Catholic best friend. She had many of the same experiences. Her friend Virginia would never have thought of going to any services with my mother to her Episcopal Church, but Mom would go with her to the Catholic Church. As Mom told me, things came up all the time – the barrier was so real in those days – but the final straw came for her when, one day just before Easter, she invited Virginia to go into the Episcopal Church with her to see the Easter lilies on the altar. Virginia hesitated and said that she needed to check with her priest. Which she did, and she came back to Mom with his answer, which was: “Virginia, if anyone from our church saw you walking out the door of the Episcopal Church, it would be just as bad as them seeing you walk out of a bar.” Needless to say, Mom was incredibly hurt by that, and after that, she didn't go back to church with Virginia again.

It doesn't make me happy to tell either of those stories, and thankfully, mercifully, all of that has, for the most part, changed since Vatican II in the early 60's. I tell them, because I want you to know that they pale in comparison to what was happening in the lesson from the Book of Acts that we heard this morning. What was happening between the Jews and the Gentiles back then makes the Protestant/Catholic divide of the 50's look like nothing!

Jews and Gentiles didn't mix. Period. They didn't set foot in each other's homes. They were about as far apart as you could be. They had names for each other – "clean" and "unclean."

And up to this point, the ministry and mission of the followers of Jesus was to the Jews, exclusively (which, of course, is pretty ironic considering Jesus himself reached out to everyone regardless of societal labels). Nonetheless, that's the way it was. Until this story in Acts – the conversion of Cornelius.

Cornelius was a Gentile – a Roman centurion. But, the scripture says, he was also a devout man who feared and followed God, along with all of his household. And so it was, that, one day he had a vision from God, in which he was told to have someone go and fetch a man named Peter, and have him brought to his house.

And so he did. Meanwhile, God was working in Peter's life as well. For Peter too had a vision – his wasn't nearly as straightforward as Cornelius'. His he had to figure out. For his vision was of a sheet being lowered down by its four corners, and in the midst of the sheet were all kinds of creatures. Then Peter heard God say, "Peter, get up, kill and eat." But Peter knew that there were things that were unclean, forbidden, so he objected, but the voice continued, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Peter must have continued to struggle with understanding, because the command was made three times. And then, a short while later, these men show up at the door, tell him they are there for Cornelius, and that he is to come with them to Cornelius' home – the home of a Gentile.

Peter, in his heart of hearts and from all of his years of training, knew that was forbidden, yet that vision was fresh in his mind. The Spirit, sensing Peter's hesitation, encouraged him, and so Peter, stepping out in faith, invited the men in, and gave them lodging. That alone, was a huge deal.

And the next day they all went back to Cornelius' home, and when they got there, they found that he had called together his close relatives and friends to hear what Peter had to say. And do you remember one of the first things he said to Cornelius? "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

And then he told all who were gathered there, that band of Gentiles, the stories of Jesus, in a powerful and moving way – so much so, that when he finished, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in tongues. The Jews that

had come with Peter were astonished by the turn of events. And all of them – Cornelius, and his whole household were baptized that very day.

Friends, we dare not fail to understand how huge this was. I probably can't use strong enough language to describe the great divide between Jews and Gentiles in that day. Like I said, the divide between Catholics and Protestants in earlier days pales in comparison.

Everything changed after this. In the very next chapter of Acts, we see the disciples branch out to new areas to share the Gospel – with whoever would hear, regardless of labels they had previously put on them. So boundaries and barriers started coming down.

Sadly, though, as we all know, boundaries and barriers still exist today – both in the church and outside of the church. We still have a tendency to divide people between “us” and “them.” Sometimes, it's because of religion, like it was in this story; but there are so many other boundaries too – liberal vs. conservative; rich vs. poor; natives vs. immigrants; straight vs. gay; black vs. white; educated vs. less educated – well, you get the picture. If you don't believe me, take a look at Facebook sometime, and see the vitriolic stuff that is posted about people of opposite viewpoints, see the mean-spirited posts about one political party or another, or homeless people who won't pull themselves up by their own bootstraps or how people should only be allowed to be in this country if they can speak English. There are boundaries aplenty in the world today, and I think the mean-spiritedness grieves God, as much as the divide between Jews and Gentiles did back in Peter and Cornelius' day.

And I think that God calls us, just as He called Peter, to be those who cross the boundaries and tear down the barriers, who bridge the divides that exist between us and others. Sadly, the church at times has not done well at that.

I'll never forget reading once that Mahatma Gandhi, when he was just a young student, read the Gospels and seriously considered becoming a Christian. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. And so one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the pastor about becoming a Christian. But when he entered the sanctuary, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go and worship with his own people. Gandhi left the church and never returned, thinking that if Christians had caste systems of their own he might as well remain a Hindu. (sermonillustrations.com)

What a loss! That was a while ago, but in the not so distant past a youth leader in a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland was called to appear before the Board of Elders of his church who were livid with him. When he stood before them they told him that they had learned from some irate parents that he had allowed some Catholic youth to be part of their youth group. What did he have to say about that? Do you know what he said? “Yes, you're right. I have and I think it is

glorifying to our Lord Jesus Christ and helping our young people to have a better and peaceable future. I think it is what Jesus would have done and wants us to do.” (On-line, “Breaking Barriers Down,” Colin Hull)

Oh friends, sometimes I think we spend so much time and energy deciding who’s out and who’s in, who’s worthy and who’s not, who’s welcome and who’s not. I’ll never forget watching the wonderful movie “Chocolat” where the mayor of the town spent all of his time doing just that – deciding who was following the rules and who wasn’t – and it was horrible for him and for everyone. Finally, at the end of the movie, on Easter Sunday morning, the young priest goes up into the pulpit and says these wonderful words:

“I want to talk about Christ’s humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. We must measure our goodness, not by what we don’t do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.”

Isn’t that what Peter learned that day in that vision from God – to embrace, to create, to include – to see people as the children of God they are, not by categories that we devise?

It wasn’t easy for Peter. We saw his struggle, and it’s not easy for us. Those of us who have been involved in the first conversations on race, know it’s not easy. There have been times we’ve felt uncomfortable, but we do it, nevertheless, because it’s what God would have us do – it’s how God helps us to start to break down the boundaries and barriers that we’ve erected – because all of us – all of us are children of God.

As individuals and as a church, we need to take an honest look at the boundaries and barriers we have set up in our lives. And once we have done that, we need to, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, look for ways to begin taking them down, a piece at a time. You never know what little thing, what little act, might just chip away at one of those boundaries and barriers.

Did you ever hear about the great church that was situated just across the street from a university campus that was known for its high liturgy, its quiet, reverent worship, its upper-crust membership – when one day, after the service had already begun, a college student came walking up the aisle, looking pretty disheveled. He had long, stringy hair, wore torn blue jeans and t-shirt and sandals. He walked up the aisle looking for a seat, but couldn’t find one anywhere. Still he kept walking and walking – and he got all the way up to the front, and since there was no seat in a pew, he plopped right down on the carpet in front of the first pew. Well, the congregation was aghast! How could he? Looking like that? Of all the nerve?

Uh-oh, pretty soon here comes the head of the Deacon board, all clad in proper attire – his three piece suit and shined shoes. He starts striding slowly up

the aisle, and it's almost as if you can hear the people murmuring, "All right, he's gonna take care of this kid. He doesn't know what's coming." And they watch, as the Deacon gets further and further up the aisle – waiting for what's coming – and then, astonished, they watch, as he proceeds to just sit down on the carpet right next to the college student.

As the congregation in all their finery and snootery sat in stunned silence, the pastor stood up in the pulpit, and after gaining control of himself, said, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget." (sermonillustrationlibrary, "Bill Goes to Church")

You see, friends, little things mean a lot. Little acts of hospitality, little words of kindness, little conversations with some talking and lots of listening, mean a lot and can start to break down the walls we put between us and others. But we have to want to do it – and we should, because God has called us to this task – to welcome all people as the children of God they are.

It's a huge task indeed, but nothing will change unless we help it change. May you and I, like Peter, have the courage to be agents of change – opening doors instead of building walls. May it be so!

Amen