

***STEP-BY-STEP***  
**Psalm 148; Acts 11:1-18**

Dreams ... Visions... What are they and how do they impact our lives? One definition of *dreams*: “successions of images, ideas, emotions, and sensations that occur usually involuntarily in the mind during certain stages of sleep.” Why we dream is still one of behavioral sciences’ greatest unanswered questions. Visions often come when we are in a trance-like state, but not sleeping.

In this passage from Acts, Peter explains his vision to the church leaders in Jerusalem after he has been called on the carpet for breaking the rules. Peter had been eating with the uncircumcised. Peter entered the Jerusalem church and squarely faced his critics. We, in the modern day church could learn something from the early Christians for too often we try to be nice at church. We try not to be confrontational. We try to sidestep controversy. We closet our differences. We paint smiles on our church faces, even as we realize irreconcilable issues. This passage provides a reminder that controversy needs to be voiced, not avoided, and conflict needs to be transformed, not ignored.

There is no need to repeat the vision word-for-word. The only change in Chapter 11 is the controversy with the Jerusalem Leaders. However, Peter tells it word-for-word, explaining it to them “step-by-step.” Peter does this in order that the Jerusalem leaders hear and believe the Word of God that henceforth frees the Gentiles from having to keep the Mosaic dietary laws in order to be included in the New Testament people of God. Presumably they are free to keep the dietary laws, if they choose, but these will not be a necessary requirement for receiving the free gift of God's forgiveness and mercy in Christ Jesus. The text is, thus, not meant to be used to arrive at whatever radical breaks with the past we in the present might wish to propose because these seem good to us, and we now wish to be good to the Holy Spirit.

Rather, this reading provides an interesting perspective from which to view interfaith relations, especially Christian-Jewish relations. The book of Acts offers an account of the origins and expansion of the church. Christianity, of course, rose out of Judaism, and many stories in Acts demonstrate Christianity's deep roots in the Jewish faith. As the church expands, a number of tensions arise. These include the Gentiles' acceptance into the church, which at the time was dominated by Jewish Christians.

Peter tells them about his encounter with Cornelius, a long story given a lot of weight in Acts, beginning in chapter 10. Cornelius, a Gentile, was a devout man who constantly prayed. During his prayers one day, he had a vision in which an angel instructed him to send for Peter and bring him back to Caesarea where Cornelius lived. Meanwhile, Peter had a vision that convinced him that God wanted him to eat with Gentiles and, specifically, that he should go to Cornelius' house. Food rituals separated Jews like Peter from Gentiles like Cornelius, but both men were convinced by their visions that they were to meet each other. When they did, the "Holy spirit fell upon them" (11:15) just as it had in the story of Pentecost in the second chapter of Acts.

With this report from Peter to the church in Jerusalem, the debate over Gentiles is joined. The people in the church asked Peter, "Why do you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Peter's convincing report of all that had happened, *step-by-step*, in his encounter with Cornelius overcame their skeptical criticisms of his eating with Gentiles. They "praised God saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'"

Events in our world in recent weeks and months make one scratch their heads as we wonder how is it that humans have lived these 2,000 plus years, have read and heard this Word of God proclaimed, and still there is debate and discussion about discrimination, about people who have differing beliefs, who look different, who live with different rules, and how we should live together in the world! How can this be? Peter told the leaders and tells us, step-by-step, what the vision was and what that vision meant to him and to Cornelius. Peter's response is not argumentative or tightly reasoned. Peter's response is to tell a story that has already been told but that is repeated in detail. It is the story, not argumentation that changes the hearts of the Jerusalem leaders. "They were silenced" by Peter's story. "They praised God" as they realized the authenticity of the Gentile's repentance.

Stories, not arguments, change lives. Had Peter come to argue points, or debate with them, he might not have been able to change their hearts. Sure Peter could have charged in demanding, "Is it fair that we keep the Gospel to ourselves? Does not God also love Gentiles?" and the arguments could have gone on for days. However, stories change hearts and lives because stories are powerful. A story invites people across the chasm, making everyone the winner.

The debate about Gentiles continued in other venues, however, and culminated in a very lively and contentious argument portrayed in Acts 15. Those of us who could easily be characterized as Gentile now take the Gentiles' early incorporation into the church somewhat for granted, but their inclusion was quite outrageous at the time. Those who argued against it had all the weight of tradition and theology on their side. In the end, however, the church decided not to impede Gentile converts. Instead, guided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, the apostles and elders spread out across the entire Mediterranean world to preach the good news. The word of God then spread from Jerusalem to surrounding territories and eventually to Rome, the *center* of the empire.

In this era, when Christianity is on the decline and many churches have closed their doors, we must recognize that Christians sometimes do not offer convincing witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Too often, we are bitterly divided against each other. We engage in sectarian battles such that our divisive and sometimes hateful actions toward each other speak louder than our words about love, grace, and salvation in Christ. Who would want to join such a dysfunctional family? Too often, we provide a counter witness to the gospel.

WE fail to recognize that The God of all Creation, the God who sent Christ into the world to save us all, is the same God who created the Jews, the Muslims, the Hindus, Buddhists and all other religions. Religious diversity has always been part of the natural order, and it remains so today. God wants us to learn to live in community with each other, growing together in our separate faith traditions. Jesus teaches Christians to love our neighbors, to seek to live in community with them. In an era of considerable inter-religious conflict, not unlike the first century when Paul encountered Cornelius, we must model how we can creatively and productively encounter believers of other faith traditions. The health and well-being of our communities, our country's democratic traditions, and peace with justice across the globe depend on it.

Our young disciples gave each of you a small heart earlier. I challenge you to place this in your shoe as a constant reminder of Jesus' command: "Love one another, as I have loved you."