

Things Aren't the Same in Joppa These Days

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 22 May 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Robin Meyers

Pentecost 1C

Acts 11:1-18

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I've preached on this text many times, because I love it— but I've never dreamed about it. That is, until just the other night I woke up early on a Sunday morning and realized that I had been having my own dream about Peter's dream at Joppa. So I did what any preacher does who is up way too early on Sunday morning. I grabbed a cup of coffee (God's gift to higher consciousness) and proceeded to scrap the nice, neat, predictable sermon I had planned and tell you what I dreamed about instead.

I must confess that I love to preach about stories involving Peter, because, let's face it Peter is the one who is most like most of us. I mean if Peter can talk about his dreams at a time when no self-respecting Jewish man was expected to trot out his interior life, confess to his shortcomings, disgorge his private struggles in such a public way—so can I. I mean let's face it, in the Mediterranean world of the first century, men did not do a lot of “psychologizing,” a lot of touchy-feely sharing, a lot of dream work as we call it these days— because, well, men are men and people don't need to know all our junk. They will think we are conflicted, weak, full of angst, insecure—in short, they will know that we are men!

For starters, Peter finds it, I think, dangerous to pray. Because while praying, he forgets how a man who is the top dog disciple is supposed to be a man in charge with all the answers. Instead, he discovers that the Holy Spirit has a way of arriving in moments when one's defences are down—bearing counterintuitive messages that reveal how much we love the *idea* of change, but how deeply, how irrationally, we struggle with the *reality* of change.

You know the story (Warren read it beautifully), something like a picnic basket is lowered down from heaven, but it is no picnic that Peter wants to have anything to do with. Instead of good kosher food for a good Jewish boy, it is full of creepy, crawly, unclean things that mama said “*don't eat*” and the rabbi said, “*listen to mama.*” Then comes the voice of God saying, I'm paraphrasing, “*Lunch is served!*”

Peter takes one look, and, to paraphrase again says, Uggg. Just not all that hungry Lord. Then he gets a little preachy: “*Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*” This is Peter the Boy Scout Jew—I've got every good conduct medal for righteous eating you can earn. Kosher Boy, reporting for service.

God has every reason to give up, but does not give up (which by the way is the real message of the Bible), and says a second time, again I paraphrase, “*Right, I know you, you didn't order this, but for your own good, Peter, I've brought you the daily special, Gentile stew.*” Again, since why stop paraphrasing now, Peter says, “*Mmm! Looks great, and I'm sure it's good for you, but I'm a “Yahweharian”* (that's a Hebrew pescetarian), and God says, “*Well, get over it.*”

Finally a third time, and that's when you know it's serious, God offers a sacred meal disguised as religious heartburn. Peter is still sitting at his childhood table and this unacceptable banquet stands in for the people he believes are unacceptable. Dietary aloofness is here a symbol of ethnic aloofness. What I call clean, says God, you must not call profane. Here it is: the lunch of the radical kingdom of right relationships. Do not turn your nose up at my cooking or my creation.

Poor Peter, he really is just like us. He is what you might call, if there was such a word: Gentilephobic. I can relate to this. I've got a few phobias of my own. As much as I hate to admit it, I am recovering racist; I am a recovering sexist; I am a recovering homophobe; I am a recovering xenophobe; I am a recovering anti-Semite. And here's one that will shock you. In America, I am a recovering Republican-phobe.

Because I can't look at a picture of Donald Trump without my heart clenching up like a fist. By no means Lord, for nothing that vile has ever been set on the table of an American Presidential campaign! I know Donald Trump was once a little boy (I don't know if his mother never held him? I don't know if his father did not love him unless he was a "winner" and not a "loser"?). And then, of course, there was Ted Cruz before he dropped out and he looks like he never had a moment of doubt about anything in his life. His face is the face of the true believer. All of this scares the bagebbies out of me.

But here's the problem. If I don't try to understand why people want to hear what certain politicians are saying, even if I don't like it, I fail the test of empathic imagination. I am not blue collar; I have never worried about where my next meal is coming from; an illegal immigrant has never taken my job; and I don't listen to Rush Limbaugh all day and all night or I might turn out to be just like him.

Peter is a recovering Gentilephobe. That is, his response to Gentiles is automatic and negative. Now that doesn't mean he has to agree with all Gentiles about everything, or not make his own choices about how he understands God and religion and the spiritual life. We are all called to make choices, but not if it means choosing to reject all those who are different as if different equals deficient.

When I say that I am a recovering sexist, here's what I mean. I grew up in the age of Playboy magazine; I learned that to be a male means to objectify women. That actually was the thesis of the centrefold. I learned from advertising and from the wisdom of the fraternity of my male friends that human sexuality is not a profound, sublime, and dangerous mystery – no, it's a competition, and that you had better keep up with your friends about your conquests or lie about it, just like they were lying about it.

When I say that I am a recovering homophobe, I mean that when I was growing up, the world was nicely binary. There were straight people like me, and there were deviant people like them. Ho-mo-sexuals is how we said it in my neck of the woods, with emphasis on the homo. It was "peculiar" I heard people say. It's just "ain't right" I heard older people say. And then of course all those crude jokes that put all gay people (a term I did not hear until I was in college), in the same undifferentiated category of creepy, crawly things.

When I say that I am a recovering xenophobe, I mean that I heard the term “foreigner” said like this - furriner - with enough distain growing up that the idea that some people would dare to come to America from someplace else—which really means, of course, non-white, non-European people—and that “we” deserved to be here but “they” don’t, makes me biased. It is amazing to me that the arrival of the pilgrims in America on a ship after which my church is named, was explained to me as a great religious pilgrimage and the “discovery” of a new, supposedly uninhabited world while those who come seeking a better life today are seen as invaders in search of welfare.

When I am in an airport, and I see a person who looks Muslim, or a woman in hijab, I will often think to myself: “*Now Robin, don’t even think about whether that person is more likely to be a terrorist than not,*” thereby confirming that that is exactly what I am thinking.

When I say that I am a recovering anti-Semite, I mean that Christian triumphalism was shot through my religious tradition growing up, and I was taught that scribes and Pharisees were all self-righteous and hypocritical while disciples of Jesus were humble and meek and knew the Messiah when they saw him. I know that the far-right leadership in today’s Israel, and, particularly, the policies of Netanyahu do not represent the views of all Jews, but when he addressed a joint session of Congress last year without informing the President it was inexcusable, and I must admit, it set me back in my struggles with the Israeli Right, and tempted me to lump all my Jewish friends together. But then of course I meet Jews who don’t like Netanyahu either. I even meet some Republicans that I do like. God is subversive this way.

But when I say that I am a recovering racist, I mean that although you will never hear me make an overtly racist remark, that does not mean that the more subtle and subliminal racism from American culture has not soaked into my bones. To prove my point, I am going to tell you what I did recently that proves in the most painful and embarrassing way why I am a recovering racist.

I was in Florida not long ago with a group of my friends who had invited me to play golf and to enjoy one another’s company. These are friends who like to play golf, and I like to play golf, and who like to go to really nice golf resorts—you know, the one’s that reek of white privilege. I am, of course, the only Democrat in the group, but the golf resort environment works it questionable magic on me as well. I just don’t know it’s happening until I do something really stupid.

So, one morning, at breakfast, we were lined up for the buffet, and it was crowded because there was a big conference happening at the resort at the same time. And as we got close to the serving line, the group of us guys could see that we were running out of plates. Running out of plates! Not a crisis, obviously, just an annoyance in the world of white privilege. How will I carry my omelette to my table without a plate? Who do we talk to around here about getting some plates?

At that moment, an African American man came around the corner, I thought he came out of the kitchen, and he looked at us in a way that suggested that he wondered, “*What’s the problem?*” I offered to speak for the group - I’m a preacher you know, I’m a chatty type. I said: “*We’re out of plates*”. But he had not come from the kitchen, he was there with the conference, and he looked at me and said, “*I don’t work here. Do I look like I work here?*”

I could have crawled into a hole in the floor if there had just been a hole in the floor. I have never been so embarrassed in my life, or so certain that I am a recovering racist. The sad truth is, no matter how much I like to think that I would never make an assumption that an African American man in that particular setting is part of the staff, the help, I had obviously done exactly that.

Three things happened, however, that were redemptive about this “Robin is busted” moment. First my friends took enormous delight in teasing me about it for the rest of the trip. “*You’d think a Minister a liberal Minister would try to keep his white privilege in check*” they said. Or when I missed a putt, “*Still feeling guilty are we Robin.*”

The second thing that was redemptive about it was that while I was trying to stammer out an apology, the man I had just insulted rose above it all and said to me, “*I’m going to keep my eye on you.*” He said it with a smile and we responded with nervous laughter. But he must have seen the look of horror on my face, and decided to use humour to say, “*I know people like you, lots of people like you, and they say things like, “Some of my best friends are black.”* But he made us laugh in that awkward moment—he took the edge off my profound embarrassment, and I remember thinking, how does he do it? How does he minister to me in this moment, and why is it that we don’t understand why that goodwill cannot last forever?

The third redemptive thing that happened is that I decided that I would tell everyone this story when the time was right, including my own congregation, because I am fortunate enough to work in the kind of church community that can hear this story, even about their senior minister. What’s more that if I don’t tell you what a stupid thing I did, you might think, that 1) I never do stupid things; or 2) the stupid things you do are never to be shared with me, or with you friends, or with your partner or spouse—that is, I guess, so that we can all walk around acting like we don’t do stupid things. We don’t turn up our noses up at anyone or anything because we are all enlightened, post-modern, over-educated, tree-hugging vegans, or pescetarians, or flexitarians, or raw-foodists (whatever that is). I just read about a category called veganarchist (what is that? Do you not only refuse to drink milk but you kill the cow? I don’t know what a veganarchist might be! It sounds dangerous.)

But here’s what I’m saying. Privilege is insidious. That African American man, who was attending a conference in the same golf resort where I was enjoying time with my friends, was sharing in the same success and privilege that I enjoy, and he said exactly what the Holy Spirit said to Peter after he turned up his nose at the Gentile picnic from hell. “*I’m going to keep my eye on you.*” I know people just like you, and you are hereby put on notice that I’ve got you figured out, but I’m not giving up on you either.

The last phobia I want to confess to this morning is one I share with the majority of church people. Neophobia, the fear of new things. We are all recovering neophobics. The seven last words of the church are: *we’ve never done it that way before.* I heard a story once about a group of elderly women in a church in Kentucky who watched one morning as members of the youth group came into the sanctuary carrying drums. They were about to sing the South African freedom song that translates “*We are Marching in the Light of God.*” One woman turned to the other and said, “*Are they going to play those things?*” and the other one said, “*Well I hope not in here!*”

Change is difficult. People have different ideas about what constitutes sacred music (I bet that's a shock to you!), which is why the worst church fights are often about music. But when music is offered as a gift to God, not as a performance, it may be to our liking or not to our liking, but it is not profane. It is an offering. We may be thinking, "*By no means Lord, for nothing that folksy or country western has ever passed my lips,*" but in the Beloved Community, the emphasis is always on the Beloved.

I'm sure that when the early Jesus People started eating with Gentiles, the keepers of the tradition said, "*Things aren't the same in Joppa these days.*" But at the very same moment, other people were joyfully saying it with a different tone of voice. They said, "*Things aren't the same in Joppa these days!*" It's all in how you say it.

When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln, I'm sure people in the south said, "*Things aren't the same in the Confederacy these days.*" But other people, who used to be called "the help" said it differently, "*Things aren't the same in the Confederacy these days. Mr. Lincoln says we're free!*"

Two years ago, when same-sex marriage became legal in Oklahoma despite the best efforts of the keepers of the so-called traditional view of marriage, people in lot of Oklahoma churches said, "*Things aren't the same in Matrimony these days.*" But at that very moment, others were coming in droves to Mayflower to be married to the person they loved and had been together with for 15-20-30 years. And they said joyfully: "*Things aren't the same in Matrimony these days. The Supreme Court says we are people too.*"

I don't know if you've heard this, but in America in a few years, we will put the former slave Harriet Tubman on the front of the American \$20 bill (the first woman ever placed on an American currency), and we're going to move the slave owner, Andrew Jackson, to the back! (And you think there's no God?) Well, "*Things aren't the same in Joppa these days*", I can hear Rush Limbaugh say: "*Integrated money. Are we happy now?*" But I live in Oklahoma, at the end of the Trail of Tears, and it was Andrew Jackson's administration that gave us the trail of tears, so thank God people can say it now: "*Things are the same in Joppa these days.*"

And that's what I dreamed about. I dreamed about a church as a place where we try, by the grace of God, not to turn our noses up at anyone. I dreamed about a place where people could hold hands in church with their same-gender partner or spouse and nobody would think anything of it, except to say, "*Aren't they a beautiful couple?*" I dreamed of a place where a transgender person could hand out bulletins at the door before church and nobody would think anything of it, except to say "*thank you.*"

I dreamed of a place where there are new voices in the pulpit, and new music, and new ways of being the Beloved Community without being condescending or judgmental about it. I dreamed of a place where lives could be rebuilt by refusing to believe that they are not broken to begin with—I dreamed of a safe place to confess that we are often frightened people who do a lot of stupid things, make a lot of lame excuses, and gossip and lie and tear each other down - forgetting that white privilege and Christianity are mutually exclusive.

"*Can we get some plates?*" Did I really say that!

One of these days, it will not occur to me to say that, and you know why? Because Somebody's got their eye on me, and on you, even on the sparrow. Things aren't the same in Joppa these days. And all I can say to that is . . .

Thanks be to God!