

As we make our way through the book of Acts, I must admit that I considered skipping the story upon which we are focusing today. Although it is one of my favorite stories and one that speaks so readily to issues confronting the church today, I considered that we had dealt with it on so many occasions that perhaps we would do well to move on past it. I could not, however, get past two things. One is the clarity with which it speaks to matters critical to the church's identity in our day, and indeed, critical to the church's identity in every age. How the church and how we as individual Christians deal with the leadership of God's Spirit, bubbling up like new wine in every generation, is determinative of whether we are Christ's church or whether we merely claim Christ's name while closing ourselves off from the ever new implications of a gospel that cannot be contained in old wineskins. In the first century the issues were circumcision, dietary laws and the demarcation between faithful Jews and a gentile who would be their brother. Today the issues are economics, race, diversity and the roles of women and people who are homosexual in church and society. The issues are different and yet so potent that we quake before them as the church has trembled before issues that have overtaken it through the centuries. Failure, however, to take these issues seriously, failure to work with everything within us to figure out the shape that faithfulness to Christ bids us take with respect to each of them is not just a failure of courage. It is a failure of discipleship to the one we call Lord.

The second reason I could not skip today's story is because of its obvious significance. It is frankly a (if not *the*) turning point in the book of Acts. It is one of the longest stories in Luke-Acts, and it is one of the longest stories in all of Christian scripture. Its length and the fact that it is told not once, but twice is indicative of its significance. We have first the story as it unfolds in the life of Peter and Cornelius in chapter 10; and then the entire story as it is retold by Peter at the Jerusalem Council in chapter 11. Peter's vision of the sheet of unclean animals coming down from heaven is told three times. Cornelius' vision of an angel bidding him to send for Peter is told four times. It may be that Luke was just having a bad day at the typewriter and got stuck in a rut; but probably not. More likely, he is laying his story out to make a crucial point. What is happening here is no accident. What is happening here is the movement of God's Spirit, and the faithfulness of Christ's church hangs in the balance.

Writing somewhere between 70 and 90 CE, Luke is writing during a time when the church is struggling to spell out its own identity. Having gone to great lengths in his first volume, the Gospel of Luke, to portray the subversive, transformative nature of the gospel, he lays out the church's crisis. Will the church carry forward the gospel of Jesus or will it retreat to more safe and expedient ground?

**History, scripture and tradition have rich meaning in a community of faith.** Lest we be flippant and make a struggle that was met and won in the past too easy, too distant from our own contemporary struggle with issues to have anything to say to us, consider the significance of circumcision and dietary laws for the Jewish people. More than hard, meaningless hoops through which they had to jump to win salvation, these were marks of identity. They were, to use the words of *Fiddler on the Roof's* Tevye, "tradition," whereby the Jewish people kept their balance, whereby they knew who and whose they were. Too recently, less than 200 years previously, the struggle to maintain these traditions and their identity had been preserved at the cost of life and limb. 2 Maccabees, among that handful of books that we usually ignore that reside between our two testaments of scripture, recounts the story we know through Hanukkah. Weary of the infighting and obstinacy of the Jewish population, the Greek ruler Antiochus IV determined in 169-167 BCE to wipe them off the face of the earth. He forbade circumcision and sought to undercut their dietary laws by forcing them on the threat of death to eat pork. He commandeered their temple for the worship of Zeus and reputedly offered a pig on its altar. Take a moment to read the 2 Maccabees' story about the torture and death of the elderly Eleazar and the torture and deaths of the seven brothers one-by-one and finally the death of their mother and the ensuing revolution and the reclaiming and cleansing of the temple. See here something of the same dynamics that were at work in Hitler's Germany as a minority people who were despised and tortured sought to hang onto their identity. Read both stories and read the reaction of the Jerusalem Christians in Acts in that same light. Read it not as the reaction of a majority population of insiders dead set against change, but as the response of a minority group of outsiders, now under Roman domination seeking still to hang on to who they were.

Scripture and tradition keep us in touch with the living dynamics of our faith. They remind us who we are and point us in the direction toward which we must go. One Reformed rabbi, asked if he maintained a kosher diet, replied that he did. Although Reformed Judaism did not require that of him, he did so, he said, by choice, out of appreciation for those who gave their lives to allow him that choice. Many Jewish people report that as they go to work in the cities where they live and as they travel to diverse places around the world, eating

kosher reminds them of who they are. As Christians, we have no reason to diminish the rich meaning it holds for them.

**History, scripture and tradition must be kept firmly in their place.** These words border on heresy; so, let's move forward quickly, but (again) firmly. Simon Peter's name gives us a hint here of where we might go. Placed on the lips of Jesus in Matthew 16:17, "Simon Bar-Jonah", "Simon Son of Jonah" calls to mind another part of the defining tradition of the Jewish people—the parable of Jonah. A number of surprising parallels exist between Peter and Jonah other than their name, but the defining link is their similarity as reluctant prophets called to preach to a people they considered outside the reach of God's grace. For Jonah, it was none other than the people of the city of Ninevah, the capital city of Assyria, ancient Israel's despised oppressor. Although he sulked at being enlisted in the service of such a "gracious God . . . merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2), Jonah's story stood in the Jewish tradition as a reminder of the freedom of God to move where and as God chooses—even among a people who seemed to hold no promise of being worthy of such grace.

Perhaps Peter was raised as a young child with an appreciation for this one whose name he shared. Perhaps he had learned at the feet of his teachers from an early age an openness to those whom others dismissed. Or perhaps his years of walking alongside Jesus had opened him to the surprising movement of the Spirit of God which blows where it chooses. Perhaps he had observed Jesus' special concern for those who barely hung on to the margins of the Jewish faith seeking an opening, a word of grace and welcome.

Peter and the church in Jerusalem certainly knew the struggle of their people through the ages to eke out a place to stand in this world. They knew what it meant to be a minority people, pushed to and fro by the wiles of the dominating majorities that ruled their world with an iron fist. Peter and the Jerusalem Christians knew something else, however. They knew the welcome they had experienced at the hand of Jesus—a welcome that reminded them of a part of their faith tradition that others seemed conveniently to overlook.

Reflecting back on his experience in the living room of Cornelius, Peter gives witness to a second Pentecost: "The Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us. If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Who indeed?

**The church's primary responsibility today resides in bearing witness in word and deed to the God of grace.** If we in the church today would be wise (and let's admit that the church does not necessarily and does not at all times and in all places lay claim to wisdom), we would do well to remember that the center of our faith, the center of our very reason to be is our witness to the gracious love of God that we have met in Christ. "Remember," the letter to the Ephesians says,

that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near. . . . [He] has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (2:12-14).

We should be clear. We are not talking about insiders and outsiders. We are not talking about those born to privilege or those who somehow scrap and claw their way to the top. We are talking knowing ourselves as those who have encountered the welcome of God in Christ, and we cannot but extend that welcome to all of those the world and in many cases, the church would relegate to the fringes. Expediency tells us to leave some issues alone—or at least to leave them alone until they are finally "safe" for the church to broach. Many felt the church had to do that with respect to the women's movement at the turn of the last century. Many felt the church had to do that with respect to the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 60's. And to the church's discredit, the swimming pools of our communities broke the color barrier before most of our baptismal pools. The issue, you see, is not about so called "political correctness." It is about faithfulness to the God who removes barriers between God's children and calls on us to remove them, too.

In retrospect, "It would have been so much easier, Jon Walton suggests, if the Spirit had left well enough alone and not blown where it did, showing Peter the wider dimensions of a gospel meant for all people, both clean and unclean. But the Spirit is a spirit of love and cannot resist drawing disparate elements together; it has a broader vision of the future and a greater hope for our humanity than we have ever imagined –Jon Walton, "Dreaming in Joppa," *Christian Century*, 2007.

Some thirty-five years ago, the Methodists had the audacity to assign a woman pastor to a small congregation in northern Georgia. My mother reported on being a part of a discussion among the workers in the school lunchroom where she worked concerning the propriety of such a move. I was proud of my mother, who I think, may have been somewhat informed by the experience of her own daughter when she assured the women that she thought a woman pastor might just be okay.

A friend shared with me her own experience as her adult son who had known a lifetime of torture and cruelty decided to undergo a sex change operation. "I will understand," he told his parents, "if you don't want to have anything to do with me." Turning their backs on their son was unthinkable to my friend and her husband. And knowing and loving my friends, turning my back on them is unthinkable. Even if it is not my son or daughter who is going through that anguish, I cannot be neutral. I cannot afford to keep my head down and ignore this pressing issue until the day when, like so many issues we have known, it finally becomes safe. God in Christ has extended grace upon grace to me. Can I do anything less for any one of God's children than to embody grace to them? Can you?