

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
 "A Boundary-Crossing Spirit"
 May 5, 2019
 Easter 3 NL 2019
 Acts 10: 1-17, 34-48

As you may know, I just came back from a wonderful trip to Puerto Rico. I was there for the Bishop's Convocation—with a group of pastors from Metro DC Synod and from the Maryland-Delaware Synod. We met together with pastors from Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands—and we had a chance to talk about the challenges we are facing in our congregations—and it was so good. I also had the opportunity to worship and preach at a lively congregation called Iglesia Luterana Reconciliacion—Reconciliation Lutheran Church—definitely a highlight of the trip for me.

I love Washington, DC—but on this trip, I realized how much it helps to get away. We are living in such an intense time—and I'm realizing that it really does feel so much more intense here because it is so close—it's the air we breathe every day. And lately, that air has been so heavy, it's hard to breathe.

When I talked with church people in Puerto Rico, I said we did not experience Hurricane Maria but we are living in the middle of a hurricane called Donald Trump. There's destruction and chaos and lots of uncertainty. People here are really on edge. I can see it in the driving—people have become noticeably more aggressive in the last six months. I've experienced two incidents of road rage in NW DC—one just a few days ago when I set someone off by going through a green light instead of stopping to let them turn left in front of me.

What's so hard about living in this is a sense of helplessness—it feels like big things are unraveling and we are small and powerless to do anything about it.

So, I just want to say, "Thank God, we have the church." Thank God, we have this place where we can remind each other that the power of God is still at work. And thank God, we are in the Easter season—that is not one day long but 7 weeks long.

During this season, we're going to have readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul—readings that reveal the effect that the Resurrection of Jesus had on the first believers—readings that remind us that the Holy Spirit is at work through the church—through us.

This story of the parallel visions of Cornelius and Peter, and the way those visions bring them together, might seem confusingly weird but there is a lot here that can feed us—and I'm not just talking about four-legged creatures in a sheet.

This super strange story is a critical turning point for the story of the early church. In the beginning, Christianity is basically like a sect of Judaism. The understanding is that you have to be Jewish to be Christian—if you're not born Jewish, you have to become Jewish first—you have to follow the kosher dietary laws and, if you're a male, you have to be circumcised.

This story of Cornelius and Peter is the breakthrough to a whole new way of understanding the faith. In this story, Peter comes to understand that the rules he thought were all important—the rules that defined what the church looked like, don't matter at all to the Holy Spirit.

Some people have visions—and some people don't. You don't get to decide whether you get a vision—it's evidently a Holy Spirit thing—but you do get to decide whether you act on it—or respond to someone else's vision.

Both Cornelius and Peter have visions but their visions could not *be* more different—they are as different from one another as the men who have them. Cornelius is a Roman soldier. He believes in the God of Israel—he prays to the God of Israel. But he does not keep Kosher nor is he circumcised. He hears an angel call his name and he answers. And the angel gives him some clear instructions to get some men together and go to Peter. The angel gives Cornelius the address of the Air BnB where Peter is staying. The angel even gives the name of the superhost Peter is staying with—Simon, the tanner. Like the good soldier he is, Cornelius follows these instructions to a T.

Peter gets a vision that is more like a sci-fi movie—a giant sheet filled with four-footed creatures and instructions to kill and eat—a little different than going out to teach and baptize. And then three times there's the message, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Just so Peter doesn't think he's hearing things, these words are said three times. Peter has no clue what it means, but he's heard the message loud and clear.

And then the Holy Spirit starts weaving these visions together. The men Cornelius sent are at the door. The angel is still with Peter and, this time, the angel gives clear instructions—go with these men sent by a Roman soldier you've never met before—just go.

Both Cornelius and Peter are given visions for a common purpose—so that they would come together—and in coming together give a new face to what the church will be. When they meet face-to-face, Peter understands the meaning of his vision—that the Gospel is for everyone. It's like Peter hears that good news for the first time *and* shares that good news. Cornelius—who's been a believer—who's had a relationship with God but never been a part of a faith community, now gets to be a part of one. He and his whole household are baptized.

But I notice how something else happens first. In our baptism liturgy, right after the water is poured three times, we have a prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit—that the Spirit will come upon this person with power and might, and bring the joy of being in God's presence. But in this story, the Holy Spirit does not follow the liturgy. The Holy Spirit does not follow the rules about keeping Kosher and getting circumcised before you can get baptized. Apparently, the Holy Spirit is wildly out of order. As another pastor put it, *the Holy Spirit is an illegal border crosser*.

The Holy Spirit is out of our control—which is both a huge relief and a bit unnerving. It's a relief because getting the Holy Spirit to do something is not on us—it doesn't depend on us. It's unnerving because *we really don't know what the Holy Spirit is going to do next*. We can't control the timing or the content.

As we think about our congregation and who we are and what the Holy Spirit is doing among us now—as we live into this desire to be a faith-rooted community with no walls—to develop a youth ministry that responds to needs in the community--it's good to know that the Holy Spirit is out ahead of us, working among people who are not part of our congregation—giving *them* visions--just like the Holy Spirit gave Cornelius a vision. We are not left on our own to figure a way forward—the Holy Spirit is making a way.

But I also want to notice that both Cornelius and Peter were open—they placed themselves in postures of openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit—they didn't wrap themselves up in the status quo.

Cornelius wasn't going along with the emperor worship that many of his military colleagues did—and Peter didn't stay walled up in Jerusalem. Cornelius was devoted to the spiritual practices of prayer and giving money to people in need.

And Peter was staying in the air BnB of Simon—the tanner. A tanner was not someone who spent a lot of time on the beach. He was someone who skinned animals and tanned them into leather hides. In terms of Jewish law, tanners were unclean—so Peter has actually already put himself out there—already gotten close to those who were seen as outcasts.

Both Cornelius and Peter were open to the movement of the Holy Spirit—which actually gets them to move—gets them to meet—and in meeting, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit is unleashed. Peter understands that the vision he had was not really about *food* but about *people*.

He finally understands those words he heard three times: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” When he meets Cornelius and his whole household, Peter gets the point of the vision: God has made *all* people and they are *all* included in God's love. *People* are not unclean—they are not illegal—they are not outside of the God's love or the community called the church which is the human embodiment of that love.

I know this is not the first time you've heard me say this—I think this message of God's radical love and complete acceptance of all people is what we call Grace—and it's the sermon I preach in one way or another over and over again. But I can't get away from it—mainly because I think it's the best news in the world but also because the voices that tell us otherwise are so loud—and I feel compelled to counter them.

John Earnest. That's the name of the man accused of going into a synagogue in California last Saturday and shooting the rabbi and other worshipers—killing one and injuring 3 others. Earnest was a member of an evangelical church in a denomination called Orthodox Presbyterian. He was a regular worshiper. He wrote a 7-page letter about his core beliefs and he said that the Jewish people are guilty of sins ranging from killing Jesus to controlling the media—And because of those sins they deserve to die. He actually believes that his killing of Jews would glorify God.

Church leaders have read his letter and say that mixed in these seven pages of hate are some clear statements of Christian theology. They say that they need to address the fact that someone could grow up in their church and come to conflate Christian theology with white supremacy. Just like Muslim faith leaders have been called upon to speak out against extremists who distort their faith, Christians must do the same.

So, what all of this says to me is that we *need* to keep the focus on God's unconditional love for everyone—and we need to talk about it and live it openly beyond the walls of this sanctuary. In the time of Peter and Cornelius, the message was that you didn't need to become Jewish to be a Christian—to be fully inside the orbit of God's love. Now, our message needs to be that you don't need to be Christian to be fully and completely loved by God. *Nothing* that God has made is unclean—all people—of every religion and no religion are people made and loved by God.

It's a wild vision—given by a Holy Spirit who is crossing every barrier that has ever existed.

Given to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.