

How Do We Grow?

Acts 11: 1-18

May 15, 2022

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

*I propose to show, that listening brings new understanding, and then we can move forward using the past and the present to create the future, as it was in the time of Peter and Cornelius, as it is now. So that those hearing this sermon will understand that listening to those we do not yet know will change us and enable us to grow.*

Come Holy Spirit...

Good Morning!

How can we grow? How can we attract new people, and young families?

I am quite certain these are the questions I am asked the most, as I make my way around our diocese, Sunday after Sunday.

Peter one of the first Apostles, and Cornelius a Roman Centurion, in the book of Acts give us one of the earliest answers to these heartfelt questions.

Peter is praying, he's in Joppa, he's healed a woman, Tabitha, and now he is staying on with people as a guest.

Cornelius, in Caesarea, is also praying. Cornelius is something of an anomaly. He is a roman centurion, a man of wealth and power. He is also a man known to be faithful to God. Though not Jewish he follows their ways, says their prayers and is known throughout the region as a good fair man, who fears God.

One day as Cornelius prays, a vision, clear and convincing, as lucid as if his next-door neighbor had knocked and appeared at his front door, a vision comes to Cornelius and says, "Send some of your men to Joppa and go get the man they call Peter also known as Simon." So he does. Cornelius takes action. He listens, risks being mocked, he acts. He sends three people to go find this man.

*Friends, I wonder, when was the last time you or your community of faith acted on a hunch, responded to a wondering: could this be God calling? How many times in our lives, is God calling, tapping into our longing, inviting us to act, and we push that notion away?*

Meanwhile, Peter in Joppa is praying, praying right before lunch and he has a food inspired vision, a really weird vision. Let's face it sometimes God is odd. In this Holy trance, Peter sees a blanket lowered from heaven, three times this weird blanket comes down and each time it is covered with animals of all sorts, clean and unclean ones, kosher ones and ones not even close, reptiles, birds, pigs, everything you can think of is on it. And he hears a voice say, "Peter, go to it, Kill and Eat." Peter says, "O no, I would never eat anything that is

ritually unclean. Any animal forbidden by law, would never touch my mouth.” Then the voice from above replies, “Never consider unclean, what God has made pure.”

*I wonder how open are we to things changing that we thought were settled and true? Can you think of a time, when you changed your mind about a topic you had only ever thought of one way? I think about how many of our beliefs about women in positions of leadership have shifted...or wondering is it wrong to be gay?*

As Peter puzzles over this, the three men sent by Cornelius, knock on the door of the house where he is staying. The Holy Spirit whispers to him go down and go with these men. So Peter greets them and they ask him to please travel with them back to Cornelius in Caesarea and Peter agrees.

Meanwhile in complete faith that his men will find God’s man, Cornelius assembles his family and close friends and waits for Peter to arrive. When he does, Cornelius falls to his feet and worships Peter. Peter is a simple fisherman and now this powerful centurion is down on his hands and knees, (you can see when we listen to the Holy, how lots of things in the established order start changing, *Acts: A Belief Theological Commentary* Willie James Jennings p 110). Peter pulls him up and together they talk.

Peter settles in with a group of folks who are not his people, not his religion; A practice that had mostly been forbidden. But because of Peter’s disturbing blanket vision, his dream of a less than Kosher buffet, he now has a different understanding, he remembers that God has said, “Never call anything or anyone I have made unclean or impure. *Peter’s perspectives are evolving, changing...and he willingly violates tradition.*

And then Peter does, what I believe we all need to do, first and foremost, if we want to grow. Friends, here is the biblical answer to our opening questions, “How do we grow?”

Peter says to them, “I want to know why you sent for me?” He asks them their story and then he listens. He asks them, “What is your story? And then he settles in and listens.

*Friends, it’s not about us. It never was and it never has been. It’s about the other people. It’s about the people we do not know. It’s about venturing out and listening to people’s stories. Tell me what you know? Tell me who you are? Tell me how you are? And I will, like Peter, listen.*

Cornelius tells Peter his story—he tells him—about saying his prayers, he mentions his longing for God, his hunger for hope, the vision from God and then how he risked acting. He risked looking.

Peter, hearing all of this is overwhelmed, he sees before him, people who are different, but people whom God has touched, and he understands, that God has blessed them too, that God shows no partiality, that God’s holiness is active in a community that is not his. And then after listening and marking the Holy in his midst he begins to tell of his own encounter with Jesus. While he is telling his story, Peter sees that Cornelius and his friends are now

filled with the Holy Spirit, just as he and the other apostles were on the day of Pentecost. He is ASTONISHED.

So, he baptizes them, for they have received the Spirit so what prevents them from being baptized with water. He violates custom and law. He baptizes and welcomes strangers in, who are not circumcised, though they are gentiles he fully welcomes them, to be one in Christ Jesus.

Word gets back and the original apostles are peeved, they are mad, they are not happy campers, they are madder than a buildings and grounds committee chair who has been told by a newcomer that they are changing the perennial gardens, they are more upset than the altar guild who has been asked, 'Hey on high holy days, instead of wine let's use really good champagne.'" They are not happy.

Here's the interesting thing, when Peter is questioned, by the earliest apostles, by the ones who are so annoyed, when they ask him, what heck is he doing??? Peter doesn't respond with theological insights, or scriptural tidbits, or canon law, instead he tells a story and they have the grace to listen.

He tells his colleagues what happened, how he went to them, how he first listened to them and then while he was telling them of his experience of Jesus, the Holy Spirit overwhelmed them.

He tells his friends the story, the story of his experience and they listen. And they changed, their perspectives shift. He ends by saying, "If God gave them the same gift God gave us, then who am I stand in the way of God?"

*Friends, how many ways are there for people to experience God? Is it up to us to limit, corral and fence in God? How do we grow?*

*When we risk moving past, only what we know, when we go out, into the world and we ask people their stories, and WE LISTEN, WE LEARN, we name holiness when we see it, and then WE CHANGE, and go forward together.*

*There is so much to say on this Friends, but how about let's start our plan to grow with Peter and Cornelius.*

Amen.