

May 19, 2019 | Easter 5

Others

Ancient Reading ~ Acts 11:1-18

The apostles and the community of believers in Judea heard with astonishment that Gentiles, too, had accepted the word of God. As a result, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers took issue with him. “So you have been visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, have you?” they said.

Peter then explained it to them, step by step, saying, “One day when I was in the town of Joppa, I fell into a trance while at prayer and had a vision of something like a big sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners. This sheet came quite close to me. I watched it intently and saw in it all sorts of animals and wild beasts— four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Now, Peter, make your sacrifice and eat.’ I replied, ‘I can’t, my God. Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ And a second time the voice spoke from heaven, ‘Don’t call profane what God has made clean.’ This happened three times, then the sheet and everything in it was drawn up into heaven again.

“Just at that moment, three messengers stopped outside the house where we were staying; they had been sent from Caesarea to fetch me. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six believers also accompanied me, and we entered the house of Cornelius. He told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter. He has a message for you that will save you and your entire household.’

“I had hardly begun to speak when the Holy Spirit came down on them in the same way she had come down on us in the beginning, and I remembered what Christ had said ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we came to believe in Jesus Christ, then who am I to stand in God’s way?” This account satisfied them, and they gave glory to God saying, “God has granted the repentance that leads to life— even to the Gentiles!”

Second Reading ~ adapted from “Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine” by Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley

The stranger is our future waiting to happen; the other is the parable and myth and lesson that looms on our horizon. They are sources of anxiety, fear, contempt, and sometimes violence. They are also necessary, for without the other, without the stranger, we are bereft of the distance and perspective we need to discover the God who is wholly other, and even to glimpse ourselves more clearly.

The other is dangerous, and difference is challenging - but the presence of the other is unsettling also because I am reminded that I, too, am a stranger. When I walk an unfamiliar neighborhood, turn off the freeway too early, or walk into the wrong meeting room, I discover that the stranger, the other, is myself.

Learning to embrace the other and honor the stranger is stepping into the unexplored world of reconciliation. It is a world unexplored, because once the other is embraced and the stranger is honored, we are in a place we have never before been.... The ordinary is transformed in our seeing... and we are surprised by what we discover in the uncharted space that reconciliation creates.

In order to embody a spirituality of reconciliation, we need the courage to be surprised. If we are willing to live toward reconciliation, then we will find instances of healing grace in unlikely places from unlikely people. When we experience ourselves being forgiven, we will in turn be surprised by the ways in which God works forgiveness in the lives of others. Our stories and God's stories intersect unexpectedly. Ultimately, it is through the stories we tell and the rituals we enact that the great paradox is exposed: to live, we have to die. In the meantime, we look for courage enough to love the questions and live the contradictions of the stories and rituals that bring them to life. To do so in the spirit of reconciliation does not demand resolution, but allows transformation as we never imagined it, and grace where we least expect it.