

Texts: Acts 10:1-17, 34-35

Subject: Peter's Vision

Theme: At the Table

Sunday; May 5, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Risen Lord,
Jesus Christ! Amen.

Last week I got to spend a few days with some of my classmates from Seminary. It was great to be with Donna, Erik, Peter, Daniel, Minna, Arlyn, and others. They were there during a time of spiritual formation for me that I will never forget. After our daily chapel services - we'd gather around tables for coffee and catching up. We'd meet for lunch at the Dog House, for burgers with our Presbyterian seminarian friends. We'd meet up for beer and theology on Thursday evenings with professors as ask deep questions. They were friends and classmates, discussion partners, and preachers of the Word, who walked with me as I was being immersed in the worship-centered experience at Wartburg in Dubuque, Iowa. I felt quite different from them in a lot of ways. They are all from the Midwest - I came from Florida. They mostly grew up in the church - it was still pretty new to me. Almost all serve in midwestern churches. I'd been out West for a decade before moving to Iowa. But those differences didn't matter when we came together to study the Word and to learn what it meant to be pastors in this church. For the years we were together, we had a common purpose and goal, and though dissimilar in many ways, were all called through the word to ministry. Being with them helped me to hear God's Word in my life, gave me strength to serve my family, my church, my community, and formed me and shaped me in ways I still can't fully realize.

Maybe you've served in the armed forces, and know how that experience has transformed you. Maybe you've fought cancer and are finding new identity as a survivor.

Maybe you've dealt with loss and heartbreak - and are still learning how that is changing you. We change one another. And more than this - we are every day being transformed through the risen and living Word of God.

As we move through the season of Easter, we rejoice in the good news of Jesus' resurrection, still pondering what this means for us in our lives and in our world. The book of Acts follows the story of the Apostles going forward into the world, as they are led to 'go and make disciples', according to Jesus command. Still in those days, saying that Jesus is the Son of God could get you killed. Saul had a conversion experience - he was one who killed Jesus' followers and yet was transformed by an encounter with Jesus. He went around preaching - proclaiming Jesus to all who would listen. And many didn't want to hear it. The establishment didn't care to hear about this new development - that the Messiah was the one crucified and that Jesus was raised from the dead. They wanted Saul - you know him as the Apostle Paul - to suffer too. But some started to listen to this news.

The Spirit was moving.

Sara Miles wrote a book called Take This Bread. In it, she shares her story of coming to faith after being raised by atheist parents. She had seen war as a reporter in El Salvador, and knew the evil people do to one another. Yet, something led her to walk into a church one day - Saint Gregory's in San Francisco - and to take the bread and wine at Holy Communion. At the table, she discovered God who met those in their deepest need - hunger and thirst, and provided all that was needed.

There were gentiles - people outside the Jewish community, greeks and romans who had enough of the worship of the Roman gods, and came to the synagogue to hear

about the God of Abraham. They were called God-fearers. This doesn't mean they were any more afraid than others, but they had respect for God. They didn't follow the law - they were *still* outsiders. They were not fully included in the community but were moved - called maybe - to hear the Word. Something about this word had power - enough that one who commanded warriors - would seek out someone to tell him more about Jesus.

What could have called this career military man out of his comfort zone to be transformed by the Word? An angel appeared to him in a vision and told him to find Peter in the town of Joppa (the modern day Tel Aviv). Already Peter was there at the table in the house of a tanner - someone who works with dead animal carcasses - to make leather. It is strange that Peter would go there in the first place. Simon would have been considered unclean by the standards of the law. He's following in the example of Jesus - who sat with those on the margins, people of faith and people cast out from community.

Rachel Held Evans wrote about faith communities in her book, "Searching for Sunday." After a life in conservative Christian surroundings in Dayton, Tennessee, she began to question her faith, to see things differently, and left her church to start a new community that didn't last long. She found welcome in the Episcopal church, and wrote blogs online about faith and doubt where she found a new community who supported her, who she in turn inspired with honesty and faithful insight. She wrote, "What makes the gospel so offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in." She was a speaker at our Rostered Leaders Gathering in Atlanta a couple years ago. Yesterday we learned that Rachel, just 37 years old, author, wife, and mother of 2, died after an illness, infection, and seizures. And we hold her family and all who loved her in our prayers.

Through his relationship with Simon, Peter was beginning to see things in a new light. He was still being transformed. After going up to the roof for a private place to pray, he sees this vision. All kinds of animals - those that were outside the dietary laws of the Jewish faith - and the voice telling him to 'get up, kill and eat.' Peter had to hear it three times to know this was the Word of the Lord, calling him into a new way of being, a new walk, a new way of sharing the abundant life of Jesus. The Word said, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

This is not just a vision - this is Peter's conversion.

The Jesus way is not just for those who followed the law, and earned a place in the company of the Lord, who followed him before and now get to rule with power, or those who knew the inside scoop, who sat at the table with him and shared a meal. Jesus' resurrection means that the promise is here and now fulfilled. Jesus *is with us at the table*. "I will be with you" wasn't a nice way to end a speech - not a heartfelt memory of their friendship and time together, but a promise that comes true through the coming of the Holy Spirit!

The Spirit leads those outside the faith to learn more - like it does for Cornelius, for me, for Sara Miles. The Spirit leads us to deeper meaning, gives comfort in our despair, and guides us to new insights - like she did for Peter, like for you, like for Rachel Held Evans. The Spirit leads us out the doors of a sanctuary, to imagine how to serve the people in our neighborhoods where they are, like Judy and Lois at Martin's Mart, like Leslie and Ashley at the Senior Meal Program, to gracefully welcome people of color, our LGBTQ siblings or those experiencing homelessness and addiction, without fear. God has made every single one of us new, and we all get a seat at the table.

We are afraid sometimes, and unwilling to make ourselves vulnerable to those who would take advantage. We shut doors and put up barriers to entry when we don't know how to engage with someone new, one who doesn't look like us, someone with different needs. We have questions too - can God help me to see things in a new way? give me strength to face the challenges that each day brings? Can God transform my broken heart? my selfish will? my forgetful mind?

We need this word of encouragement, this weekly gathering to hear the Word that brings comfort as we confess our own guilt and selfishness. We need each other, to share in our differences, to confess our fears, and to receive grace and mercy at the table. We need each one at the table to sit with us, eat with us, and be ones to reflect the love of God's Word back to us, forming us for life in the Kingdom.

God's Word changes us - transforms us. Maybe that should make us afraid. if we are ones who are so comfortable with our way of life, with our system of government, with our station in life - if we are set in our ways, mostly happy with the way things are, and not looking to rock the boat, we ought to be truly afraid of what God's Word can do in our lives. On a cross, Jesus' transformed the cosmos, the universe, our earth and all that is in it, through His death and resurrection. Everything has been transformed - made new - changed from death into life.

So we move forward with boldness! We trust and pray. We walk together, we hold onto one another, we hope together, and bear one another's burdens. Every boundary we set, God has already crossed. Every place we are called to serve, the Jesus is already there. We follow this holy curiosity sparked by the Spirit, and go into uncharted territory, to welcome others to the table, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.