

**We are Witnesses: To The World**

May 6, 2007

Acts 11:1-18

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We don't put much stock in visions any more.

- We usually call them dreams or hallucinations

- and either ignore them

- or try and pretend they didn't happen,

- but that wasn't the case in Peter's time.

- In those days,

- people took visions seriously.

- Visions were one of the ways that God communicated

- with God's people.

- So, - - when Peter

- has a vision

- of a large sheet coming down from heaven,

- with unclean animals

- and a voice saying

- “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”, (*Acts 11:7 - NRSV*)

- he doesn't dismiss what he is experiencing,

- but rather he allows this vision

- to inform his ministry of

- preaching and teaching about Jesus.

- Prior to this vision,
  - Peter's ministry had been primarily with other Jews.
    - He was Jewish.
      - Jesus was Jewish.
        - All the early Christians
          - were Jewish people who believed
            - that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah
              - who fulfilled the ancient teachings.
- But this vision,
  - caused Peter to re-examine his understanding
    - of God's relationship with all people.
      - As he reflected on what he had seen,
        - Peter appears to have become open to the possibility
          - that God sent Jesus,
            - not just for the Jewish people,
              - but for everyone.
- What Peter did,
  - in welcoming these non-Jewish people into the community
    - was completely in-line with the example Jesus had set during his lifetime. - -
    - Jesus had eaten with tax collectors and sinners.
      - Jesus had broken numerous religious laws during his day.
        - Jesus had opened the door to a new way of understanding scripture.
- But even though Peter is really just following in Jesus' footsteps,

- that doesn't mean that
  - everyone thought he was being faithful
    - to the ministry Jesus had begun.
- Some in the community probably thought that
  - Peter had abandoned the true faith
    - and watered down Jesus' message to reach more people.
  - Some of his fellow believers were a little unsure about
    - what he was doing -
      - and questioned Peter.

“Why,” they asked “did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:3 - NRSV)

- Why did you invite
  - all *those* people
    - to the party?
  - Why did you welcome those outsiders into our midst? - - -
- To put this in perspective,
  - what Peter did would be the modern-day equivalent
    - of a gated, multi-million dollar home community,
      - throwing open the gates
        - and inviting the poor and the homeless
          - to come and take up residence in all the open spaces.
    - Peter's actions
      - opened the door to change the whole community,
  - so it shouldn't be surprising

- that Peter's fellow believers were a little worried about what he was doing. -
- But as Peter discovered,
  - some times the most faithful thing you can do
    - is take a radical, but faithful step in a new direction - -
  - and that's exactly what Peter did
    - when he began to share Jesus' story with all God's people.
- Reaching out to the whole world
  - went against everything he had been taught about
    - the differences between us and them.
  - These gentiles,
    - these non-Jewish people - -
      - were outsiders,
        - who didn't know all the all the traditions and customs.
    - These new people,
      - were literally, unclean according to the old laws
        - and weren't to be associated with.
    - These children of God
      - were so very different
        - that certainly they could never fit in
          - with the rest of the believers.
  - But Peter saw,
    - through his vision
      - that God in Christ Jesus was doing a new thing.

- God in Christ Jesus

- was starting a new covenant relationship

- not just with the people of Israel, - -

- but with all God's people,

- regardless of family heritage,

- regardless of cultural differences

- regardless of skin color

- regardless of social status

- regardless of gender.

- And Peter

- wasn't going to deny these children of God,

- the promise of forgiveness that comes to us through Jesus Christ -

- simply because they were from a different town.

- Peter wasn't going to deny these children of God

- a relationship with our loving father, -

- simply because they spoke a different language.

- Peter wasn't going to deny these children of God

- the hope of eternal life, -

- simply because they dressed and acted differently.

- This new covenant,

- this new relationship with God,

- this promise of hope and forgiveness and love

- was,

- is for all God's people.
- And although many, many years have passed
  - since Peter went out from Joppa
    - in some ways,
      - not much has really changed - -
  - for just like Peter and the early disciples,
    - you and I have the opportunity
      - to be witnesses
        - to a world full of people
          - who know little or nothing
            - about the good news of God's love for us.
- Oh, certainly there is a group of people today,
  - like those early Christians,
    - who know the good news about Jesus,
      - but there are millions and millions of other people around the world
        - and thousands of people in our area
          - who have no idea who Jesus is,
            - and how much God loves them.
- We, like Peter,
  - are the witnesses to God's presence in the world.
    - We are the ones who can tell God's story
      - through our words and our lives.
        - We are the ones who can share our vision of a loving, caring God

- who welcomes all who believe.

- Which is not to say that you personally

- have to talk to every single person in the world

- and tell them about Jesus.

- No - -

- I think the example of Peter

- helps us to realize
  - that while sharing God's story,
    - sharing God's love with the whole world, - -
    - is a part of what we do as children of God, - -
- How we share God's story,
  - God's love
    - depends on the specific gifts and talents God has given each of us.
- And so,
  - if your gift is public speaking,
    - then you may witness to God's love through your words.
  - If your gift is building relationships,
    - then you may witness to God's love
      - through the care and compassion you show to others.
  - If your gift is working with your hands,
    - then you may witness may to God's love
      - through an act of service in the world.
  - If your gift is an empathic heart
    - then you may witness to God's love
      - by listening to someone who is grieving
        - or by taking a handful of the resource books we have available
          - and handing them out to friends
            - or placing them out at work
              - where people can pick them up
                - and discover a word of hope

- in their time of grief and pain.

- We are witnesses to the world.

- We are gifted and called

- to make Jesus known

- to anyone who will listen

- and to those we don't even realize are listening.

- And while you and I may not have had a vision, - -

- like Peter did,

- I think Peter's example

- and the example of the early church

- offer us a vision

- of how we can be faithful

- when we encounter new ideas,

- offer us a vision

- of how we can be open

- to the leading of the spirit,

- wherever it may guide us

- and offer us a vision

- of how we can create an inclusive community

- which reaches out to all God's people

- to share the good news of God's love for us

- in Christ Jesus our Lord.