

Experiencing God's Gifts of Change!

#3 "When Change is Difficult"

Acts 11:1-18

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

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My week of continuing education was spent at the 27th Annual Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis, a week-long international gathering of more than 1,500 preachers. We gathered inside the cavernous cathedrals of Central Lutheran Church and Westminster Presbyterian Church to hear three preachers a day for five days. For those of you who are counting, that's fifteen sermons. And for those of you needing to catch up on your church attendance, next year's conference will be in Atlanta. I'll get the dates for you. Eight hours of preaching every day.

Walking around this gathering of ministers and church types reminded me of something an older pastor once told me. He had grown up on a farm and said that in his opinion ministers were a bit like manure. Spread them around they do great work, but when they're close together things can begin to smell.

There is some truth in that statement, but what was also true was the startling power of God at work in this diverse array of pastors and church leaders. We heard some sermons from some of the finest preachers in the world, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, African Methodist Episcopal, Pentecostal. Older men and young women. Straight and gay. Persons of all races. Imagine, if you will, the rather painful sight of watching white, middle aged men trying to keep time to gospel music! There were academics as well as pastors, pastors from churches both large and small, including the Rev. Traci Blackmon from St. Louis.

But somehow community emerged. There were reports that Baptists had attended the Lutheran-sponsored "Beers and Hymns" evening. Church leaders shared their struggles: how do we engage new members? What happens when your "youth group" is in their mid-70s? What style of music works best?

By the end of this exhausting, exhilarating week I was left feeling a bit like Peter after his encounter with Cornelius, the Roman centurion, in Acts chapter 10. Astounded that salvation had come to Cornelius' house, Peter slumps against the wall in shock and says: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

It is an astonishing moment of change.

Peter did not always feel that way. Peter had been trained to see Jews as God's chosen people, and Gentiles as impure foreigners who were to be avoided. Jewish laws forbade the sharing of food with Gentiles. This was Peter's hard and fast worldview.

All of that changed, Luke tells us, when Peter had a vision of God calling him to eat of every kind of animal – both kosher and not so kosher. As Peter prays, he becomes hungry – perhaps he smells a lamb roasting, or fish being grilled, the wonderful sounds of fresh fruit being prepared, breads baking. He continues to pray when suddenly he experienced a vision of heaven being opened. How do you explain this? I’m not sure, but I can tell you my mind does strange things when it is hungry.

He sees a gigantic sheet being lowered to the ground. In the sheet were all sorts of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds – none of which Jews were allowed to eat. You may remember the time we invited a rabbi to come to Woodlawn Chapel. We asked her to teach us about the Passover Seder. And, of course, since we are Presbyterians, we threw a potluck – a not-so-kosher potluck, as I recall. I remember feeling worried that we might offend her, until she said, “Shrimp! I love shrimp!” She nudged me and said, “I’m not terribly Kosher!”

But Peter’s worldview was not that way. As a faithful Jew, he would never have thought to eat any of the food he had seen. Read this story, reminds Will Willimon, as it was first heard: “from the minority point of view, people for whom a bit of pork or a pinch of incense or a little intermarriage was a matter of life and death for the community. The dietary laws are not a matter of etiquette or peculiar culinary habits. They are a matter of survival and identity for Jews.”¹

But the voice of God kept coming to him: Rise, Peter, get up, eat...what God has made clean you must not call profane.”

None of this makes sense to Peter until he learns that apparently he is not the only one seeing visions. It appears that a Roman – a centurion, a gentile, named Cornelius had asked him to come to his house. God had appeared to him, and had told him to send for Peter. “So now all of us are here,” Cornelius tells Peter, “in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

Peter is challenged by God’s gift of change. And when word of this gets back to Jerusalem, the church becomes agitated and concerned. Exactly what is Peter up to? Cavorting with Gentiles and going to their pig roasts? They are beyond irritated.

Change is never easy. That is a very important thing for us to know – and it is especially important to for our confirmation students to know – everything in life changes – your circumstances, your health, your life, and even your faith. Sometimes change—even good change-- is difficult or even painful.

Jean Vanier, who died last week at age 90, challenged the church to live according to Jesus’ vision of community as expressed in the Gospel of John. In creating the global [L’Arche](#)

¹ William Willimon, *Acts*, p. 96.

[communities](#) for persons with intellectual and physical disabilities, Vanier would often refer to Jesus washing the feet of the disciples.

“At L’Arche we discovered quite early the importance of the washing of the feet,” Vanier wrote in “The Gospel of John, The Gospel of Relationship.” “It is especially important for us because the people we serve are living with a disability of some sort, and may not always understand the Word of God or a text. So the gesture accompany a text takes on new importance.” Humble service and the communion of deep relationship shaped Vanier’s understanding of the L’Arche community, which now includes 10,000 persons living in more [than 150 homes across the world](#).

In creating these communities, Jean Vanier extended the vision offered by Peter when he crossed the boundaries to receive Cornelius into the fellowship of believers. Not many understood Vanier’s commitments, which he described as [derived from a belief](#) “the belief in the inner beauty of each and every human being.”

Peter comes to see change as the gift of new possibilities by remembering all that Jesus had taught. He recalls that Jesus said he would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He remembers the time Jesus taught about a shepherd who went looking for the one lost sheep. He replays the conversations Jesus had with the outcasts. He hears the words: go into the world.

This is the gift which these young people who join the church give to us. Four them are in middle school and one is in college – truly God shows no partiality! These are not easy moments of life – I never met an adult eager to repeat middle school, and Beth, I just want you to know that there will be a time when the words “final exam” are no longer part of your vocabulary! I remember asking my sister in law Kathy what she had learned after a year of teaching middle school. She said, “There is a very good reason why most of us do not choose our mates in sixth grade.”

We are challenged by change, and challenged by its continuous path throughout our lives. Think of the last time you were challenged by change. It was not easy, of course, and maybe even confusing. It is not easy to be challenged to change our way of seeing the world. As Joan Chittister observes in her book *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, change may push us into a time of struggle. We may see that there are only two choices: to change what cannot be endured, or endure what cannot be changed. Yet there is a third option. Chittister points out, “we could be transformed by the possibility of new beginnings.”

So it is with Peter: he remembers.

He raises his head and says, “Who am I to hinder God?”

Rise up, Peter. Rise up, church. Go into this world. See God’s gift of change, and be challenged to think in new ways, to dream in new ways, to see God in new ways. Rise up,

Peter, and remember what God has called you to do. Rise up, church, and remember that there is plenty of room in God's house.

Rise up, Church, remember what Peter said, "Who am I to hinder God?"

Rise up, and say yes to these young women who can teach us many things. Rise up, and say to those who have been excluded – by race, by orientation, by social condition, "God shows no partiality." Rise up and say, "Who are we to hinder God?"