

Sermon 5-19-19
Paul Purdue preaching

My mother was terrified of water: terrified. She could sit on the edge of a pool almost shaking with fear. And yet, she sat on the edge of the pool. Mom's almost irrational fear, of even the shallow end, came to me as a four year old through mandatory swim lessons. After ending one swim lesson, freestyling my way down the entire lap lane, Bridgette, our gangly and good natured aquatics director, asked me to join the swim team. Later that summer I won my first ribbon. Mom took swim lessons in her fifties so that she could don a life jacket and swim around the houseboat. I treaded water beside her, holding an extra throw cushion. From mom's deep fear of water, she gave us a lifelong love of pools, lakes, rivers, swimming, diving boards, cannonballs and waterskiing. She did not allow her fears to keep us from diving in.

Fear can hold us back, hold us in place. It can quench the Spirit. Maybe that is why Jesus says over and over: "do not be afraid." The clergy and laity began to hear that even the Gentiles had welcomed God's word. When Peter went up to the Council of the Apostles, the circumcised believers criticized him. They accused him, "You went into the home of the uncircumcised and ate with them!" They feared the gentiles might infect the community with spiritual uncleanness! Fear feeds exclusion. Fear builds walls. Perfect Love casts out fear.

We might fool ourselves, thinking this is a minor point of theology, like pork barbecue or headscarves in church. It is a big deal in 35 AD. The traditionalist had good grounds to criticize Peter. They have tradition and Scriptures on their side: two of the four legs of the quadrilateral. The Scripture stretched back to Abraham: "You, you must keep my covenant in every generation. This is my covenant you must: circumcise every male. Your flesh will embody God's covenant as an enduring sign. Any uncircumcised male must be kicked out of the community!" (Genesis 17) Circumcision marked and defined the covenant. Exodus 12:49 did not even allow gentiles at the Passover Meal. The Holy Spirit inspired us with personal holy experiences and reason, leading us to set aside tradition and Scripture.

The circumcised believers criticized Peter. They accuse, "You went into the home of the uncircumcised and ate with them!" Did they hide their biases behind Scripture? At times, our beautiful rituals that define us: holding hands, kissing, parenting, Holy Communion, baptism, ordination, music and marriage trick us into believing we are the chosen ones and others are not. We see this tribal arrogance in sports and the arts. Why do we think ill of someone sporting a different jersey, but loving the same game? Why love classical music or classic rock and judge another genre harshly? Why do we tend to think the other side does not love it's own? Deep affection can blind us. Fondness can fuel fears. Let us be careful that our sense of what is holy, beautiful, and good: does not lead us to declare others don't belong to God! To exclude others, to deny their call, to criticize the Spirit's stirring within them, is beyond our paygrade. "Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. (Instead) Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you." (Matthew 7:1 or Luke 6:37) Is it not presumptuous to say: "I know God's call for you?" or "I know how God made you?" Paul asks: "Who are you to judge God's servants? They stand or fall before their the Lord -And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand!" (Romans 14:4)

Jesus, did you befriend tax-collectors and prostitutes? Peter, did you eat with gentiles? Why would we want to exclude others who simply want to follow God with us? Unless we think we are better than others? So “step-by-step, Peter explained what happened. “I was in the city of Joppa praying when I had a visionary experience. In my vision, I saw something like a large tablecloth being lowered from heaven by its four corners. As it descended down towards me, I stared at it, wondering what it was? I saw pigs, possums, shrimp, and snakes. And the celestial dinner bell rang: “Peter! Come and get it! Supper is ready!” “Absolutely not, Lord!” Peter answered “Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” And God said, “Never call unclean what God has made pure.” Can a leader’s vision give us enough spiritual space to set aside Scripture and Tradition?

Peter continues: “At that moment three gentiles arrived at the house asking for me! The Spirit told me to go with them even though they were Gentiles.” I can imagine the party of circumcision seething under their smiles, ready to smack Peter’s spiritual impressions down with a big leather Bible! Have we learned anything in 2,000 years that should shape our theology? Can we say the earth is round, despite verses about the four corners of the earth? Has God done anything in the past 2,000 years that might guide our understanding church laws? Did we not drop headscarves, barbeque pork, end slavery, and ordain women? Should not our experience shape our tradition and lead us to re-think Scripture? Does the Spirit still speak?

Peter continues: Six brothers went with me, and we entered the Roman Centurion's house. Cornelius told us how he had seen an angel calling out “Send to Joppa and summon Simon Peter and he will tell you how your whole household can be saved.” Hear this verse: “Cornelius told us!” Jesus listens, dines with, and loves those on the margins. The Church listens to “the uncircumcised.” The “unclean” voices factor into the church’s evolving understanding! Let us note, God first sent the angel to Cornelius, then Cornelius knocked on the church’s closed doors!

I love the set up in Acts 10. The uncircumcised Colonel finishes his story and invites Peter, “Now, here we are, gathered in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has directed you to say to us about how to be saved.” (Acts 10) Oh this is a preachers dream! We would like to walk into Fido and one call for quiet and say: “We are here together, Now Preach to us!” No doubt, Peter had a sermon ready. Maybe from Joshua 5, where before the exiles entered the Promised Land, and after 40 years in the wilderness- Joshua got out the flint knives for circumcision! But Peter never gets to preach! “When I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as the Spirit fell on us in the beginning” God sorta said, “Nope- Peter- no sermon today- just listen to what I am already doing” So Peter “remembered the Lord’s words: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’” and reasons “If God gave them the same gift he gave us, then who am I? Could I stand in God’s way?”

Peter sets aside the essence of the covenant asking: “If God gave them the same gift God gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God’s way?” Peter may not understand this movement of the Spirit, he might wonder how God could set aside 2,000 years of Scripture and Tradition, but Peter would rather risk breaking the law than resisting the Holy Spirit! How about you? Who are we to stand in the way of what God seems to be doing? Do we dare deny a whole group of

people's call or not pronounce God's blessing at their marriages? Do we know what God is doing inside their hearts better than they do? Will we ignore new voices like we once ignored women's voices, or the cry of slaves, or Galileo's astronomical insights? Will we listen to those outside our communion and believe God might speak through their experiences: "Cornelius told us how he had seen an angel calling out"!

Once the apostles and other believers heard this, they calmed down. They praised God and concluded, "So then God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life."

Mom shamed me to attending her first swim lessons. I was in high school, a competitive swimmer, and a lifeguard. As her instructor coaxed her into the deep end, mom shrieked out, her worst curse word, "Oh Lauzie!!" That was as close as mom got to cursing. How embarrassing to see everyone on the pool deck looking at your mom trembling at the edge of the deep end. Mom was about 53. One burning July, in her sixties, mom finished her "annual" lap around our rented houseboat. She took the extra float noodle from me and said, "let's just float out her for awhile." We did. By her seventies mom could float in her life-jacket, with a noodle and someone next to her, laughing as her grandchildren cannonballed off the ski boat. My boys never knew just how afraid she once was!

How wonderful when our fears no longer trap us, and we discover God has gone before us! How tall, long, deep, wide, and boundless is the the love of God? How wonderfully freeing to know God is the judge! "*Who are we? Can we stand in God's way?*" Amen.