

“Faith Changer” GPPC 5-19-19
Psalm 148, Acts 11:1-18

You may have noticed that we human beings hunger for routine, constancy, structure, and tradition.

Play peek-a-boo with a small child. (Peek-a-boo!) Do you do it just once? No. Of course not. You do it a couple of times and then what does the giggling child say? “Do it again!” Some kids and adults will play this game for a long time, because we love repetition. “Do it again!”

Listen to your favorite song. Doesn't it have a few verses and it has a familiar refrain, a refrain you and your friends might jump in and sing, right? And if it just had new verses without the refrain, you wouldn't like it very much. Who has a favorite song without a refrain? Nobody.

And we want some rules, some structure in our daily life. There are rules for how you drive a car, even if the other driver seems unaware of that small, magical lever on the left side of the steering wheel. Rules for how we govern and are governed, even though rules are sometimes demolished. Rules even for how we worship God, even if sometimes disagree. There are some rules in our lives. And we like that.

Jeff Paschal

And we require some dependability. If I need to get up in the night and I'm walking in the dark, I don't want the furniture in new places when I'm stumbling around in the night. And for heaven's sake, I don't want you to have moved the refrigerator or, even worse, the bathroom.

And when our lives are enveloped in dark nights, in turmoil, we're scared or sick or grieving, then many of us particularly cling to familiar patterns, rituals, and tradition. That's why it's especially hard for some people when they see the church or our faith change in some significant way. These folks are in pain, because it feels as though the ground under their feet is shifting like an earthquake. And then one more change is thrust upon them. It's hard.

Maybe it was hard for the Christians we read about in the Book of Acts, because the story we read today in chapter 11 is almost an exact repetition of the same story told in chapter 10. Why in the world would Luke, the writer of Acts, do that? Because the events that happened were so important and they were that challenging.

As one preacher says, "A controversy had erupted in Judea when apostles and believers, good Christian Jews, heard that gentiles were

Jeff Paschal

being converted to the faith. This was hardly good news to people who were the bearers of a messianic expectation and a code of laws that nurtured and defined their separation from the uncircumcised and the unclean. Admitting gentiles into the synagogue seemed like inviting foxes into the henhouse, and unclean foxes at that.” (Jon Walton, *The Christian Century*, online, April 17, 2007.)

And you know how it happened. Peter had this vision. The Greek word means a sort of ecstatic trance. And in the trance, in the vision, Peter saw something like a huge sheet coming from heaven and on the sheet were various animals considered ritually unclean. A voice, the voice of God, said, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” And Peter said, “No way, Lord. I’ve never eaten anything unclean.” This happened three times and then the meal got whisked back up to heaven. By the way, I noticed that another pastor in our area has titled his sermon “When Pigs Fly.” Not bad.

So Peter rejected this meal that may or not have included North Carolina barbeque. But after all, he had read the Bible and he knew the laws about which animals were allowed to be eaten, which were

Jeff Paschal

considered clean and which were considered unclean. If you want to check the list yourself, read Leviticus 11:2-28 and Deuteronomy 14:3-20. The list was clear and constant and had been for thousands of years. And it was good to know what was expected. So Peter was resistant to change, so resistant that in the vision God offered the meal to him not once, not twice, but three times. And he said “no” three times.

But the Spirit wasn't finished. (God is sneaky that way, you know.) As the Spirit would have it, just then these men showed up from Caesarea. The Spirit told Peter to go with them and not to make a distinction between them (Gentiles) and the other Jewish Christians. The Greek word for distinction here can mean “to judge” or “to decide,” but here it means “to differentiate by separating.” Peter was told not to “make a distinction,” not “to differentiate by separating.”

And you know how the rest of the story went. The Holy Spirit “fell upon them” (again) and the message from God was summarized as they said, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” So there was no longer any unclean food and as one

Jeff Paschal

Bible scholar put it, “[Peter] had received a vision from God which called him to minister to all people--there are no unclean people.” (Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts*, 113.)

This was unsettling news to the early church, so unsettling that the story is in the book of Acts in chapter 10 and then again in chapter 11. After all, it had been clear for thousands of years what the unclean foods were and who the unclean people were. And then in a flash, in a Spirit-led vision, in a word from God, it was all changed. So there was resistance. But ultimately there was also joy. “And they praised God saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’”

The Spirit is still sneaking around making these changes. First, it was food. Then it was “uncircumcised Gentiles” being welcomed into the church. And then the Spirit led the church to apply the same principles in other ways.

Think about our congregation and our Muslim brothers and sisters at the Islamic Center over the last few years. Our faith has changed not only because of a new vision, but especially because of

Jeff Paschal

relationships, time together at shared meals with good and rich conversation.

Think about our congregation and LGBTQ folks. Our faith has changed not only because of the Spirit speaking, but in particular because of our chance to build relationships, friendships, with LGBTQ folks.

About 20 years ago, Presbyterian writer, Anne Lamott told the story of a man named Ken who began worshiping in the same small Presbyterian church where Anne worships. Ken had AIDS, and his partner, Brandon, had AIDS. And Ken began to come church after Brandon died. As Lamott writes, “. . . Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon’s loss left, and had been there ever since.” Ken’s physical condition began to fall apart. He lost weight and his face looked like he’d had a stroke. In his struggles, the congregation cherished him and the relationship they were building.

But one woman, Ranola, who came from another branch of the Christian faith was uncertain about how to relate to him. She’d been

Jeff Paschal

reared in a denomination that declared Ken “an abomination.” So she was not hostile but a bit distant from him.

One Sunday in worship the church sang “Jacob’s Ladder.” “We are climbing, Jacob’s ladder.” But Ken was sick, and he could not stand up. Then the church sang “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” Ken was the only one not standing for the hymn. Lamott writes, “And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up—lifted up this...rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang.” (Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 63-65.)

The Spirit continues to change our minds and change our faith. And like the story in Acts, what really makes a difference is when the Spirit shows a new vision and then that vision is reinforced by building relationships.

How has God changed your mind? How will God change our minds in the future? We don’t know. But it’s worth keeping an eye

Jeff Paschal

and an ear open for the ways that God will call us to expand our
hospitality and discover a deeper joy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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