

Sermon Preached on May 15, 2022 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

By The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME 04096

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

Welcome and Change

So what would be on your sheet?

Or perhaps, what might be more important for us to consider is, what would be on our sheet, as the community of St. Bart's?

I'm referring, of course, to the first reading this morning from Acts – the one where Peter tells of a vision he had where a large sheet descended from heaven and on it were “four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.” Peter heard a voice say “Get up Peter, kill and eat.”

But Peter wasn't going to be fooled – if this was a test he was going to pass – “By no means, Lord;” he said, “for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”

You see there were things on that blanket that were ritually considered “unclean” based on Kosher eating laws in the Torah and from the teachings in the Synagogues – killing and eating anything on that sheet would be against the rules.

But then a voice calls back: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

This happened three times, this vision.

Peter doesn't say that he immediately understood what it meant, but he mentions that just as he came to from this vision, men from Caesarea came and brought him to a Roman guard named Cornelius and Peter baptized Cornelius and his whole household.

The story of Cornelius actually comes first in the book of Acts before this story of Peter's vision.

But, Peter tells people about his vision because they question him about why he not only went to, but ate with, and stayed with a Gentile – an unclean act, an unclean person – it was unimaginable.

It's because God gave him a vision that assured him – What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Between this vision and Cornelius' public profession of faith, Peter realized: “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

Who was I that I could hinder God?

Some people refer to these stories as the “conversion of Cornelius” – they tell the story of when a gentile who grew up with different traditions and a different religion, experienced the love and grace of God and was converted to follow this new way – the way of Jesus.

I’ve heard a few other scholars ponder whether this is actually the “conversion of Peter” – not to Christianity of course, but to inclusion, to welcome, to understanding that God’s love extends beyond the perimeters he knew – it tells the story of when a Jesus follower who grew up IN the tradition and shared the same religion and culture as the other people in the movement, experienced the love and grace of God and was converted – It was Peter’s conversion to the great beloved community.

God’s love is not restricted to one culture or community – God’s love extends to all, even those we had once considered “unclean.”

One of my queer colleagues calls this passage “the anti-clobber” passage.

There are six passages in the Bible that folks have identified as speaking to gay-ness and queer-ness, or so they say, and those of us in the queer community call them the “clobber passages” because they’re mostly used as a club to clobber queer people.

My colleague calls this passage from Acts the anti-clobber passage because it speaks a word of radical inclusion – and it IS radical.

Radical because altering the Kosher rules was a BIG deal – God doesn’t just love the people who will change their ways to be more like the “in” crowd, God loves everybody.

Radical because God invites Peter to change – to consider a broader understanding of possibility – as he welcomes gentiles, not the other way around.

So, what would be on our sheet – what are the things that you, that we, continue to hold up as measures of whether someone is “in” or “out” – whether someone is welcome, whether someone is accepted?

Do we realize we even have a sheet?

For a very long time, there was a sheet up, a wall really, preventing queer folks from experiencing welcome in church and in society.

And I realize I may need to say a word about the word “queer” – I know it has been a slur word used to demean LGBTQIA+ individuals and therefore it can be bristling to hear – I mean it not as a slur word but as an empowering word, an umbrella word under which there are many identities and expressions of identities that all counter the cultural norms of heteronormativity and patriarchy.

It is the word I am often most comfortable using to describe myself and the community of which I’m a part.

And for a very long time, there was a wall preventing that community of queer folks from experiencing welcome in the church and in society.

It prevented queer folk from getting married, from being ordained to serve the church, from raising children without intrusion, from attending worship with their family, from being accepted.

There was an “in” side to this wall and an “out” side.

And, thanks be to God, there are people on both sides of the wall who saw it – maybe they didn’t see it descend the way Peter did, but they saw it in place – and they worked to get that wall taken down.

My standing here this morning as your priest, as a woman married to a woman, is the result of centuries of advocacy and work on the part of my queer elders and many allies and accomplices who have torn down those walls.

Through policy, through courts, through Canon, and through elections.

The pace of change for queer people over the past few decades has been lightning fast.

And, I’m so grateful – and, let me tell you what I’ve observed, especially in the church.

When that wall came down, rather than stopping and taking a look up and down the spectrum of people – up and down the spectrum of what relationships look like – up and down the spectrum of who our priests and deacons look like – rather than looking up and down that beautiful spectrum and thinking “yes, this is the long table of Christ’s eternal feast.”

What I see more often is, “the wall has come down, so now you can come over to our side. You wanted “in” right? Look and be like us as best you can and you will be accepted.”

Tone down your femininity, don’t be so butch.

Wear the clothes assigned to your gender, put away your drag.

If you’re in a relationship, it better look as close to a marriage as possible if not actually be a marriage.

Nevermind the fact that queer people have only been able to legally marry in all 50 states for less than 10 years – less than 10 years!

If you can fit in you can be accepted, you can get a call, you are then worthy of being safe, you can belong

That’s what Jesus said, right? Wrong!

Jesus basically just said the last bit – you belong! You are loved!

There was so much of what Jesus said and did that at the end of his life the last piece of advice he gives to his disciples, his last commandment, is “love one another as I have loved you.”

Peter is the inheritor of that ministry and when the word of this love gets out and people from other lands and other traditions want to join, Peter has a vision that helps him to know that this is not only okay it is God’s intention.

The picnic blanket – I know the scripture says it’s a sheet, but in my head I envision a great picnic blanket coming down from heaven – the picnic blanket doesn’t descend from heaven and the voice say “take this picnic blanket to the new converts and teach them what it means to be clean and unclean.”

The picnic blanket descends and the voice says “what God has made clean you must NOT call profane”

It’s a gospel of tearing down walls and making longer tables, not tearing down walls and making slightly shorter hurdles for inclusion

For every story I could tell of queer people coming up against barriers in our church and in society, our Black, Indigenous, and other siblings of color; our disabled siblings; our homeless siblings; our neurodivergent siblings, all have their own stories to share.

We are a community of Christ – the community of St. Bart’s – and like Peter we are the inheritors of this great ministry and the great commandment to love.

What’s on our picnic blanket, our sheet, our wall? Did you know it was there?

Mitzi J. Smith, a Black woman and Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA, writes that “we need to allow our biases and stereotypes to be checked...This construction of others who are different from us as “unclean” based on those differences signifies a belief in our superiority...Sometimes our self-definition is constructed upon differentiating ourselves from others, instead of upon who we are in God.

“the only way we begin to put an end to making distinctions between ‘them’ and ‘us,’” she says, “is to learn to recognize and admit our biases and their impact on human relationships. Racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other biased behaviors and thinking are not godly; they are motivated by fear of the other and not by love of humanity.”¹

Some of the walls that divided people in our churches and in society HAVE come down, thanks be to God.

But there are still sheets up.

They are the sheets that falsely offer comfort, stability, and protection.

They are the sheets of privilege and fear.

¹ Smith, Mitzi. “Fifth Sunday of Easter: Commentary on Acts 11:1-18.” *Working Preacher*. 24 April 2016. <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-111-18>>

The sheets that communicate to those on the outside “you don’t belong here.”

The sheets of our community need to come down, the sheets in our own lives need to come down.

What’s on your sheet? What’s on our sheet? What transformation of heart do WE need to love and accept and include others?

For what God has made clean, we must not call profane, and who are we that we could hinder God?

Amen.