

Easter 5, Year C (RCL)
May 21, 2019
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

God is Doing a New Thing

The Easter Season is the time of the church year when we focus most clearly on the fledgling Church that emerges after Jesus' resurrection. Without his bodily presence among them, Jesus' followers begin to keep his memory alive by telling others his story and by telling their own stories of how his life has transformed their lives. They move from being disciples (people who followed of Jesus) to apostles (ones sent out to spread the good news). The story we read from Acts today is a prime example, because in it, we see a Galilean fisherman who has been transformed into an apostle and a young church that is redefined because of it.

But before we get there, we need to back up to chapter 10 of Acts, where today's story starts with the conversion of Cornelius. This is a VERY important story because it breaks open the very narrowly defined early church to include Gentile Christians. Sure, they had been welcomed prior to this, but only if they were first circumcised and made Jews. This is not that. This is Gentiles being welcomed as Gentile believers. In its day, this was every bit as radical as GLBTQ Christians being welcomed and embraced as whole and holy people in places

where the previous narrative has been, “You are welcome to join us IF you go through conversion therapy or at least stop being who you are so you can be like us.”

This is big. Really, really big. And it is amazing to me that this conversion story is nowhere to be found in the Revised Common Lectionary! You might recall though Peter’s speech that *follows* the conversion of Cornelius from the lectionary text for Easter Day: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.” (Acts 10:34-42) That’s a great resurrection story, appropriate for Easter, but taken out of the context of the story of Cornelius, we miss how truly radical a proclamation this is. With Cornelius, God is doing a really important NEW thing, and thanks to a

vision that helps him see the light, Peter is totally on board.

The story goes that Peter is hanging out in Joppa at the home of Simon the tanner, having just raised a woman named Tabitha from the dead and, by doing so, inspiring the locals to believe. Meanwhile, 33 miles up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Caesarea, a Roman centurion, known as a good, generous and prayerful man, is having a vision in the middle of the afternoon. An angel appears to Cornelius, scaring the bejeezus out of him, and directs him to send for Peter in Joppa because Peter will have something to say that he needs to hear. So when the angel leaves, Cornelius sends for a couple of his slaves and a trusted soldier, tells them of his vision and sends the three of them to find Peter.

The next day around noon, as the search party is approaching Joppa, Peter has gone up on the roof to pray and is having a vision of his own—the one we read today that appears in Chapter 10 of Acts and then again in Chapter 11 about the sheet being lowered with all kinds of animals in it and being told to kill and eat. Being a good Jew, Peter refuses, because to do so would violate Jewish dietary laws. The scene is repeated three times before the sheet is lifted back up into heaven. While Peter is shaking his head and trying to make sense of the vision, the Spirit tells Peter that he should go with the three men who are about to arrive asking for him. Somewhere between Joppa and Caesarea, the dots begin to connect for Peter and he understands the meaning and implications of his vision. Because when he arrives, he says to Cornelius

and to those with him, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Then, as Peter begins to tell them about Jesus and the resurrection, Acts tells us that “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word and they began to speak in tongues and to glorify God.”

Realizing that these Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit, just as Jewish believers had, Peter responds by baptizing them.

All this sets the scene for today’s reading from Acts in which the “circumcised believers” get their knickers in a knot and demand that Peter explain himself as to just why he thinks he doesn’t have to color inside the lines like everyone else. Wisely, he decides that he isn’t going to argue with them. Instead, he tells them his story. His vision. Cornelius’s story. The baptisms that followed. Why not, Peter asks? “Who was I that I could hinder God?” It isn’t about what I did, Peter tells them, it is about what God is doing. After which they were silent—they could think of nothing to say. Then they began praising God, excited over the news that Gentiles joining their ranks.

The Cornelius account is a startling one for several reasons—there are the wacky visions, the radical redefinition of who is in and who is not out of the new church, and then there is Peter. Are we seriously supposed to believe that Cornelius’s conversion is facilitated by the same Peter from the Gospel account? Peter—the impulsive fisherman,

the well-meaning but oh so blundering and insecure disciple, who more often than not says the wrong thing and misses Jesus' point entirely— Peter—who we've grown to love even as we have rolled our eyes at his cluelessness, seems to have transformed into a confident, wise, and articulate preacher overnight! If it had not been for Jesus' proclamation, "On this rock I will build my church," we would never have seen this coming.

Peter is no longer the clueless disciple. Cornelius is no longer standing on the outside looking in. Gentile Christians are validated as "real believers." And it is a whole new day for the church. From that point on, the church grows by leaps and bounds because the gates have been flung wide open. God is definitely doing a new thing, and as God's followers, we would be wise to pay attention!

When Bishop Scarfe visited New Song a couple of weeks ago, he asked in his sermon "Are we willing to be surprised by God?" I've been thinking about that question ever since. Are we?

Are we willing to let God's Spirit guide the direction of New Song, instead of trying to fit it into the molds we already know?

The mold may say that to be a healthy church family, you must have lots of children and youth and a vibrant array of educational offerings to draw them in and keep them interested in things of the faith. The Spirit may say that families come in all kinds of shapes and sizes and configurations, and may ask us to consider what new thing God

might do in our midst with the gifts and the people we have instead of focusing on the gifts and people we don't have.

The mold may say that the way we get things done is to hire a capable leader who will tell us what to do and how to do it. The Spirit may say that we have the gifts we need within ourselves and that what we need is to spend time in prayer considering how we are called to offer our individual and corporate gifts for the sake of the Gospel and of the church. Personally, I am hopeful that will involve gathering a new ministry development team in the near future.

The mold may say that meaningful pastoral care can only come from ordained clergy. The Spirit may say, "Horse-hocky!" Meaningful pastoral care comes from people who listen carefully, people who care generously, people who love expansively – ordination is not required for any of that.

Granted, molds can be useful tools when you want to make a lot of things that look the same. But they can also limit creativity and possibility. What if God is calling us to be more than a faithful reproduction of the image we have in our heads of what church is and should be? What if instead, God is calling us to see things in an expansive new way as they could be? Can we be open to the surprises that God has in store for us and for the world and then work together to make God's dream a reality?

God is full of surprises: we need only the eyes to perceive them

and the hearts to receive them.

As I was writing this sermon, a message came across the Episcopal News Service that both shocked and delighted me. The Diocese of Western Tennessee consecrated Pheobe Roaf as their new bishop on May 4th. Not only is she the first woman to be elected as their bishop, she is the first African-American to be elected as bishop of Western Tennessee. And she's the first African-American woman to be elected a diocesan bishop in the South. That this could happen in Western Tennessee still has me trying to pick my jaw up off of the floor. I could never in my wildest dreams have imagined this day could be possible when I lived in Memphis 40 years ago. Like the conversion of Cornelius, this is huge! God is doing a new thing among us—breaking the church open in a whole new way.

This gives me enormous hope, and great gratitude for the new life that God's Spirit continues to breathe into the church and into each of us as God's people.

In the words of the Revelation to John, God says: "See, I am making all things new."

May God give us eyes and hearts that are open to the new things that the Spirit is doing in our midst. Amen.