

Brick by Brick

People love to build walls of separation, setting up systems of who's In and who's Out. The world is stuck here...stuck in this place of division, hatred, and fear. It's past time for the Church to do something about it. And in case we've missed the memo, the Acts of the Apostles cries out to us today to imagine, and bring to life a better world.

The Early Christians struggled to understand just what this better world should look like. Jewish believers in Jesus were, understandably, overcome with joy that their Messiah had come. But alongside their joy, they retained a kind of ethnic and religious sense of superiority. "Gentiles...showered with the Spirit just like we are?" Peter's response is beautiful and crystal clear. "All are welcome to enter the waters of baptism. God is doing a new thing!"

Beautiful, yes, but it's also the product of spiritual evolution. For within this very same chapter of Acts, Peter was earlier shown to be struggling with the same issues of division and prejudice. *About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.*

You see, Jesus knew the struggle that raged within Peter...how he still saw the world through a prejudicial lens...that there were 'clean' and 'unclean' people...that some were winners, and some were losers. At first, Jesus figured a vision would do the trick...that Peter

would grasp the deeper meaning. But that didn't work. To accomplish this transformation of the heart, it literally took a voice from heaven announcing, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*"

I wish some in our world would get this same message as loudly and clearly as Peter received it. God knows the world would be a better place. But we can't control the world, can we? We certainly can't control those who live in it. All we can do is control what we say, what we do, and what we think. So, while it would be easy for us to take potshots at those who might be stuck in such backward thinking...the harder task, and ultimately the only task that matters, is for us to peer deeply into our own hearts, minds, and souls, and bravely ask God: "How do I contribute to such a divided and hostile world?" Hopefully, you aren't in the habit of throwing around racist, sexist, or xenophobic slurs. But, when you hear them, when they are spoken in your midst, do you find yourself keeping quiet, or do you confront the ugliness? When you encounter someone who doesn't look like you, smell like you, or speak like you, do you immediately throw up the defenses of fear, or does your mind first see them as a beautiful child of God?

Just last week, we witnessed the inclusion of an Ethiopian Eunuch into the life of the Church. The sound of splashing water as he was baptized was also the sound of a crumbling wall, for once upon a time, eunuchs were forbidden from entering the holy places of God. So it says in the book of Deuteronomy. And yet, in this new economy, those divisions were left behind in a distant memory. The status that once marked him as unclean was no longer a hindrance to his sharing in the mysteries of God. In this beautiful story, however, a dangerous precedent was set. God can, and does, change the rules of the game, even when that means contradicting what was once believed to be a law given by God himself. So too, in this age, in

this world, God changes the rules of the game, even when it confronts what we once held dear about God and the Church.

Returning to Peter...eventually, he was face to face with Cornelius, a Gentile who was ‘God-fearing’...a euphemism for a Gentile who believed in the God of Israel. And here, it wasn’t just Cornelius who had a conversion. It was Peter too, being converted from a place of exclusivity to a place of human inclusivity. *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.* From this encounter, from witnessing the goodness of a Gentile, someone he once considered unclean, Peter was led to testify to his fellow Jewish believers, *“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”* He saw the light, and it confronted everything he once held dear and sacred. But that’s God for you...challenging the status quo, upending the social norms, breaking down the walls that we so tightly cling to.

These walls are still up. But clearly, our God isn’t the biggest fan of walls that divide God’s children...isn’t a fan of walls that breed hostility and distrust. And until God speaks as clearly as he did to Peter, it’s up to us to break them down, brick by brick, slur by slur, label by label. Get your hammers out, friends. Pentecost is coming soon. The Spirit will fall afresh and anew, reminding us that we are one human family, with no one on the outside, no one on the margins, no one less than. There are none who are unclean, unworthy, or unloved by God. In fact, why wait until Pentecost. Let’s get started today, doing our part to build a better world, enlivened by the same Spirit that transformed the heart of Peter and changed the face of the world. *God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.* Friends, let’s change the world again!