

“Let us praise the Lord,  
his glory is above earth and heaven.” AMEN!

I was reminded of the story that  
goes around social media from time to time.

It shows a father driving the family sedan and  
his young daughter buckled in the backseat.

The girl is old enough to unbuckle the seat belt,  
so she decides she wants to stand up  
during the drive.

Calmly, but firmly, the father directed  
the daughter to sit down and put  
her seatbelt back on, she finally does.

A minute later, the girl said to her dad,

“Daddy, I may be sitting down on the outside,  
but I am still standing up on the inside!”

The father couldn't help but smile at her boldness.  
(Pause)

Beloved, you know there was a time  
when girls were not allowed to  
be acolytes or crucifers in church.

There was a time when women couldn't be greeters,  
or ushers, or lectors, or serve on Church Council.

There was a time in the church when  
they weren't allowed to vote at  
congregation meetings.

In our branch of Lutheranism,  
women couldn't be ordained pastors until  
Nov 22, 1970!

In some branches it's still that way.

How many little girls saw themselves standing up  
on the inside during such times of restriction?  
(Pause)

They weren't only about gender.

There was a time when lay people couldn't  
give out the elements of communion.

A time when men and women had to sit on  
opposite sides of the church.

If you had gone through a divorce, there was  
a time when you couldn't receive communion  
and the only musical instrument allowed

to play at worship was the organ.

How many people in the church saw themselves  
standing up on the inside during these  
restrictive times and  
God smiled at their boldness? (Pause)

In all these restrictions and amidst that defiant  
natures of those being kept out,  
a fresh breeze of God's Spirit blew into  
the church and new things were tried  
and new norms accepted.

Then, as Pastor Glenn Ludwig wrote,  
“the gospel and its expression took on  
new opportunities and new dimensions.”

It was the Body's (the church's) response to the  
guidance and  
the prodding of the Holy Spirit.

And it was as if, God smiled  
as the beloved children stood up and  
claimed their place to serve as  
the Spirit led them.

We give thanks to God that we have moved away  
from such small minded restrictions and  
beliefs that the church is an exclusive club

where membership and service are decided  
on things like gender or age or  
other human made restrictions.

We thank God, but most are honest enough to say  
more change is necessary  
because religion has always had to deal  
with issues about who is in and  
who is out. (Pause)

Even Peter had more to learn.

He was fresh off his healing of Aeneas,  
the man who'd been paralyzed (and bedridden)  
for 8 years.

Peter had just raised Tabitha/Dorcas  
from the dead (our reading last week).

Such successes under his belt,  
but Peter's journey with the Holy Spirit was  
still not complete.

It never really is, is it?

Peter was called to Cornelius' home.

A centurion of the Italian Cohort, Cornelius

was a believer of God and gave generously  
to people who had less and  
to people who suffered from poverty.

We know many people like Cornelius, don't we?

People who have giant hearts,  
they do things with acts of  
selfless and generous love for others,

even though they don't go to church or  
call themselves Christians.

Our story today tells us God loves them, too. (Pause)

So, Peter followed God's Spirit into  
the home of a Gentile, which was (by the way)  
allowed by his faith, but it was ill advised  
to do because once

one is inside another's home the host  
may offer food (and for a strict Jewish person)

that can be problematic because one didn't  
know how the food was prepared or  
what might be in the potato salad. :-)

Anyway, what we have read today in Acts,  
is Peter's report to the Church at Jerusalem.

He went because word had reached them and  
he was being criticized for what he did.

Notice, they don't question him on going inside  
the home of a gentile, they ask,  
"Why did you eat with them?" Mmm.

Peter gave them the play by play from verse 5  
all the way to verse 18.

A vision of a variety of foods coming down  
to Peter and God's voice commanding him to eat.

Surely, it's a test, Peter thinks.

Some food was okay, or kosher,  
but other foods on the blanket weren't -  
according to the food restriction laws.

3 times Peter objected and three times  
the voice said,  
"What God has made clean,  
you must not call profane."

Then, at the next moment, three men come  
from Caesarea and announced to Peter  
the way an angel had come to them and  
told them to find Peter and bring

him to Cornelius' home.

The vision suddenly made sense. (Pause)

You see, God was doing things that Peter and  
the church in Jerusalem didn't understand.

They couldn't put together what  
the Holy Spirit was up to so they bristled  
and reject the ways God was  
making things new. (Pause)

A church was looking for their next pastor and  
talked to a candidate right out of seminary.

The congregation was in decline,  
but during the interviews  
the call and the Council,

told the new pastor they wanted to grow.

The pastor was called to the congregation and  
together they taught themselves to  
knock on doors around the church.

Over a period of two years the numbers at  
worship grew by 60 people.

Except they were different people than the ones

whom the core members used to  
welcome.

This influential group never opened up  
to the new folks to share ministry  
nor allow space for their stories to be told  
nor did they welcome fellowship.

One by one, the 60 people left and  
then the pastor left, but not  
the community altogether.

The pastor left that church to plant  
a new one with those 60 people. (Pause)

I spoke with a pastor a couple weeks ago  
at another church in Florida and they said  
they have one member of the congregation

who goes up to the parents of little children  
in church to tell them their child is too loud  
and needs to leave the worship space.

No matter what the pastor (and Council members)  
do to express the importance of  
welcoming children, even the loud ones,

this individual continues to feel like they  
need to police parents in order for worship



to be quiet and tranquil.

The pastor fears the parents will stop coming  
to church and the family growth  
they are experiencing will cease. (Pause)

Both true stories reveal to us that  
it doesn't take many people,  
even when they have the best  
intention in mind,  
to destroy a growing church or

put the final dagger in the heart  
of a declining one.

This is why today's texts are  
so important for us  
to really take into heart.

When Jesus gave the new commandment  
to love one another, it was to reveal  
the way God loved the world.

God said, "I love you so much that I am giving  
you this law to love one another."

And Jesus followed that command all the way  
to the cross because he had love  
for his disciples and for the world.

Does God like the things humans  
do to one another sometimes?

Pretty sure the answer is “No” to that  
just like the way we don’t like others sometimes -  
but we stand up on the inside  
to love them just the same

Because that’s what God does to and for us. (Pause)

Yesterday, a new door opened and God’s Spirit  
moved through the apostles, and  
through the church in Jerusalem.

Today this same Spirit blows through and moves us.

I pray that this same Spirit opens for us  
new forms of service and possibilities  
that lead us to love one another.

AMEN!