

“Attitude Adjustment”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2010
Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Open the door of our hearts, God of Time and Eternity, that we may see more clearly that all the creatures of the earth, all the plants, all the insects, and all the people, are your works in which you take delight. Amen.*

At a family gathering, a grandmother was coaxed into doing something she had never done before. After much friendly badgering, she climbed slowly up on an exercise bike. She took her time getting in just the right position. She waited a few moments. Then, nervously, she said, “All right, you can turn it on now.”

If only work in the church could be handled like that. If we could magically flip a switch, and the watch as the work is done for us. But work in the church requires a delicate blend of divine inspiration and human perspiration, with a whole lot of patience and understanding thrown in.

Today’s lesson from the Acts of the Apostles is striking in its similarity to that which so often takes place in churches today. It probably wouldn’t surprise you to know that many ministers have been and continue to be criticized by one group or another in a church for reaching out to new people. It most likely won’t surprise you, either, to hear that many a minister has been called on the carpet to explain some new direction or some new ministry of the church. The minister then faces the challenge of communicating and “selling” what he or she perceives to be what God is calling the church to be and to do.

As I understand our lesson today, Peter was confronted with the dilemma of “preaching to the choir” or taking the message beyond the

boundaries and comfort zones believers had established for their close-knit circle. Upon learning that Peter had eaten with Gentiles, the church council said to him, “You did what? You ate with them? You had the nerve to *baptize* them? How dare you violate the boundaries established by scripture?”

And Peter told them his story, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat”.

Peter replied, “Lord, I’ve never violated the sacred Jewish dietary laws.” And God said, “Nothing God has made is unclean.” The vision was repeated. Then the sheet was pulled back up to heaven. But...Peter still didn’t get the point. Why such a heavenly fuss about dietary restrictions?

Immediately Peter is called to go to the house of a Gentile. The Holy Spirit descended and Peter was told he needed an attitude adjustment. It was then that Peter figured out that the vision from heaven was not about unclean food, but, rather, about “unclean people” that he needed an attitude adjustment. The gospel message was intended for all people and all nations, not just a select few are part of the spiritual inner clique. And the whole church marveled that “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance which leads to life”.

As I read our lesson this morning, I can’t help but think that God wants us to have an attitude adjustment, too. If you ask me what we have in the church today is a kind of spiritual incest, where we have inbred a message of hope only for those with whom we feel comfortable. But, my friends, that is not the kind of church the world needs today. We don’t need zoned churches and

zoned Christians. What we need are churches and messengers who will go beyond the conventional boundaries and safe havens we have carved for ourselves!

It is true that humankind has an affinity for those people, places, and things with which it feels it holds the most in common. Human beings are tribal and clannish by nature. We fix ourselves in groups which reinforce our identity, safety, and comfort. We gravitate least towards those who threaten our sense of well being, make us insecure, and rattle our sense of purpose in life. We live and think and act and coexist in community with those we believe share our values and views.

The question is: Would we have the message of love and hope of Christ if Christ had stayed within the confines of his hometown? Would we be believers if those early proponents of the gospel had played it safe and never brought the Good News to people who were different?

A great tragedy today is the number of churches who are shrinking and dying and closing. Often the reason is that they do not reach to people in surrounding neighborhoods because “those people” don’t think like us or share our views.

The good news in our lesson this morning is that, in spite of our fears of the unknown and our lack of trust in the Spirit’s movement in our midst, we cannot completely restrict God’s work in the church. Churches are resilient. In spite of the human factor, there is also the divine factor at work in the church. The criticism expressed to Peter certainly did not keep the early church from growing.

The same is true for us. God will have God’s way with the church. Despite our personal agendas, it is God’s purpose that will be fulfilled in the life of God’s church. But there are some things we can focus on that will enable our churches to be more effective.

Peter had a vision from God of a sheet

containing animals, reptiles and birds. The clean and unclean animals represented circumcised and uncircumcised people. The sheet represented the church which should include all people. Friends, to me that means everyone – regardless of their class, or their race, or their sexual orientation, or their prior or “un” church history.

During his vision, a voice came to Peter, saying, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” The message was from God, and the vision of what a church should be and who it should include came from God. It is God alone who will guide the Church. It is God alone who is worthy of determining that which is appropriate for the Church.

A young woman was eight months pregnant; she had a two-year-old son. Her son locked himself in the bathroom. This really frightened his mother. The woman got a screwdriver and tried to take the door knob off. She got most of it off, but she still could not get the door open. She could see into the bathroom, though, and it scared her. Her son was trying to turn on the water in the bathtub. So, she talked him into coming away from the bathtub. Then he started climbing up on the sink, trying to get into the medicine cabinet. Finally, she was able to get him to sit still on the stool while she went to call her husband.

Her husband frantically raced home from his office. He rushed in the front door to find his exhausted wife lying on the couch, and his son sitting in the rocking chair, rocking away as nonchalantly as you please.

The man turned to his wife and said, “What happened? I thought he was locked in the bathroom.” His wife said, “Well, when I hung up the phone, I had a good idea. I got an Oreo cookie, I held it up for him to see it through the keyhole, and he opened the door just like that.”

The little boy had the ability to open the door all along. All he needed was the proper motivation. The same is true of the Church. We

have the ability to fulfill Peter’s vision of a Church which draws all people together in unity, but we must be properly motivated. It will require that we set aside our personal agendas and seek God’s agenda for the church.

Peter went with the three men who came to him from Caesarea because the Spirit told him to do so. As a result of his faithfulness, Peter witnessed and experienced things he would otherwise have missed. Ultimately, he recognized that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles in the same way it had come to the Jewish Christians. So he asked, “If God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, he asked “Who am I to hinder God?” We could ask the same question of ourselves. Who are we to stand in God’s way? Just think, if we expect the unexpected from God, our experience in and our service to the church will be meaningful and fulfilling. And we can work together to build the Church that fulfills Peter’s vision of unifying all people in the body of Christ.

After all, what if the ones we would exclude from the fellowship of the Church are the very ones with whom God intended to bless us? Perhaps Paul’s words to the church in Ephesus are ones we need to take to heart. “There is one body and one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. Perhaps all it takes is an attitude adjustment. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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