

6th Sunday of Easter

Sermon 5.10.15

Scripture: Acts 10-11:3

Jack and I were running errands one day midwinter a number of years ago, when he was four years old. The world was frozen and wind-whipped. At each stop, we rushed from car to door, from car to store. In a neighborhood now that I was unfamiliar with, we poked along the narrow street looking for the right house, the right house number where we were to drop this one thing off. Then Jack spotted a boy climbing clumsily out of a car just down the street, an older man hoisting himself out from behind the wheel. “It’s Franklin!” he squealed, recognizing him from school. “Let’s go see Franklin! That’s where Franklin lives,” he said, so excited as if we’d unearthed some secret. Finally, we knew where Franklin lives!

And, to be honest, this was something that had been kept from Jack, though not on purpose. It wasn’t that I, or anyone else, had made a calculated decision to keep Jack and Franklin apart. It’s just that it had never occurred to me, or it seems to anyone else, to bring them together. Though sweet and ever-smiling, Franklin is someone who might have once been called “retarded”—with underdeveloped motor and language skills, with likely a low I.Q. Unfazed, Jack was still squealing, “Let’s go see him,” his car seat straining to hold him in place. “We can go to his house!” And so we could, a little further down the frozen hill, a wind-rocked shack with towel-covered windows that might as well have been a foreign land to me. Unimagineable.

I live neatly. I like order. Really, when it comes to where I live, I need the sense that here is a place prepared for a purpose and for a people. No surprise: this is how I was raised, in a home not big or fancy, but orderly and well-planned. The room with the wooden table was where we ate. The room with the chairs and sofa was where we read and watched TV. The basement was where my sister and I played, my mother sewed, my father built and fixed things. The rooms with the beds were where we slept. And, while as a kid I never fully knew how important all this this was to me, I did know (and did feel ashamed of the fact) that I had friends whose homes I visited once and managed never to again. Being there was just too unsettling.

Jack, though, I could see in the rearview mirror, was exploding with joy. “Okay,” I said, and drove down the street to where their car was parked. Franklin and (I assume) his father were inside by now, behind the door that I couldn’t figure out how to knock on, all plastic sheeting and duct tape, nothing left of the original storm door but its bent aluminum frame. So, I knocked on the

outside wall—a plywood board that contributed to the patchwork. I heard voices inside go silent, only a baby babbling loudly. I knocked again. Then came footsteps.

It's very hard to hear this encounter between Cornelius and Peter with anything but our urbanized hearing. Though this has every appearance of being a country church, though we have every appearance of being a country people, we are (let's not kid ourselves) largely urbanized. By this I mean we're comfortable with people who aren't from here. Sure, we might resent them ever so slightly, especially on summer weekends at Guido's or when they drive down the wrong way on Housatonic Street. (There goes someone right now, as I write this!) But we also need them. Moreover, we likely appreciate them. Truth be told, we *are* them: only two people in this congregation hail from here, Sally and Dick. Sheela comes next, from Egremont. Really, Monterey has long been a town for out-of-towners.

What's more, it's tough to hear of this encounter between Cornelius and Peter with anything but our globalized hearing. We know well what Peter only this moment had discovered, that God shows no partiality, but that in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. In fact, I imagine this is an idea we're so comfortable with that we'd take offense at its opposite: that God really does like one people best and everyone else is beyond hope. And this, of course, is the challenge in preaching this story, this encounter. How to recover what must have been Peter's experience of his values emptied of meaning and his assumptions dismantled? How to retrieve what may have been Cornelius's shamed apprehension about contacting Peter at all?

There's our challenge. Let's see if we can meet it.

Cornelius was a centurion. Centurions were leaders in the Roman army, leaders of groups of 100 soldiers. As a century is a period of 100 years' time, a centurion is a commander of 100 soldiers. More to the point, though, as far as Peter might be concerned, centurions had as part of their military duty the task of nailing condemned men to their crosses.

It happened all the time, you know. Men were crucified outside the city walls frequently, were left to die there on crosses, planted into the landscape like grotesque lawn ornaments. Actually, it would happen to Peter. Like Jesus, like so many others, Peter would meet his death by crucifixion. Peter would meet his death at the hand of a centurion.

Of course, he didn't know that now, but he wouldn't have been off base to suspect such a thing as possible.

As to the crucifixion that Peter was sure of—that is, Jesus’ crucifixion: who knows whether all centurions knew each other? Who knows how small a world theirs was? Who knows: maybe Cornelius knew the men who’d crucified Jesus. Maybe he knew that one centurion who, standing before the cross, had said of Jesus, though too late, “Surely, this man was innocent.” Maybe these unnamed centurions were he, himself. We have no reason to think this is so. But there’s also no need not to think so. So, let’s go with it. Let’s say Cornelius was that close to the cross of Christ, saw from up close the brutality and grace at work that day, not long ago now, just a few weeks.

A devout man who feared God, Cornelius might have been newly and increasingly so—and for the reason of witnessing what had happened. Now generous with alms and prayerful all the time, Cornelius might have been increasingly ill at ease among the empire in whose service he’d until now lived his life—for this is what constant prayer can get you: a sneaking sense that you’re not at home amidst the empire, a persistent pain that something here is very wrong. This, too, though is what constant prayer can get you: the strengthening assurance that your true home is breaking in even here, even now.

But such strengthening assurance isn’t what first struck Cornelius at the in-breaking of the angels. Terror was.

Meanwhile, across the region Peter was having a vision of his own, making this a so-called double-vision story—these, which have the Spirit of the Lord work two angles in order to bring about an encounter between two quite different people. It’s the second double-vision stories in as many chapters from this book. Just prior to this, Saul-turned-Paul and Ananias were brought together by this same method. Now Cornelius and Peter would be moved toward one another, as well.

The fact that Peter was in Joppa at the time of his vision, when the Lord approached and told him to go with the three men at his door; the fact that he was in Joppa when the cohort of two Gentile slaves and a Roman centurion came for him to bring him to the Gentile region of Caesarea: this fact is likely meant to pique our hearing. Would Peter, found in Joppa, obey the order? Would Peter in fact go from Joppa to the Gentile land that the Lord had told him to enter? Or would he do as Jonah had famously done—Jonah, that long-ago prophet featured in a quite funny story? He was also found in Joppa, and he was ordered as to go to Ninevah, and he was determined then instead to go in the opposite direction, to Tarshish where the Lord would surely never find him. Right?

Jonah, you might remember or you might have forgotten or you might never have known, hadn't wanted to go to Ninevah because he knew that the Lord would forgive the sinners there. He knew that the Lord—though sending Jonah with a message of warning, though sending Jonah with a promise of divine punishment and destruction for the people of Ninevah because of their disgusting (though undescribed and so perhaps unimagineable) way of life—would then forgive the people and deliver them from said destruction. Jonah knew that the Lord, after all, would find the people of Ninevah acceptable, even lovely. At the end of the day, the Lord wouldn't go through with the destruction of which Jonah was to prophesy.

And Jonah had a problem with this, for two reasons.

First, it would make Jonah look the fool. It would drain him of any authority he had among the Ninevites to begin with, and a prophet is only as good as his word. Of course, if you preach destruction and then destruction doesn't come, people will stop listening to you. (Hey, whatever happened to that guy?)

Second, it would reveal the Lord as distressingly universal in his loving and forgiving, even accepting of all sorts of people. But rules are there for a reason, right? Boundaries serve a purpose.

Well, the Lord did find Jonah, even in Tarshish (or, more accurately, on a ship set sail for Tarshish). Moreover, the Lord did get Jonah to Ninevah—by way of a whale according to this comical story, which draws a line of distinction between the story of Jonah in Joppa and Peter in Joppa: Jonah's story is funny, while Peter's is serious, even gravely serious.

Imagine being at home, praying or getting ready for bed or tending to your children or doing that thing that, when you do it, you are at your least guarded. Imagine padding around in your pjs in the darkening of evening when, there they are, ringing your doorbell, peering in through your front window. They've come to take you with them—three strangers. What's more, they're people who could easily overpower you. You're old: they're adolescent. You're a woman: they're men. You're black: they're white and in armed uniform. You're gay: they're straight and skin-headed with black, shiny boots. Sure, they say, "We're bringing you to one of ours, but he's a nice one." Yet that hardly helps. Sure, you've heard a still, small voice speaking to you in prayer, saying, "Go with them without hesitation." Yet this is just one voice among many, and a dissonant one at that. Do you open the door? No one would blame you if you didn't. Really, the people who love you most in the world would probably thank God if you didn't.

Peter went with them. As we know, Peter did go. Primed by his own hunger (a weakness made strength for the Lord); prepared by a vision whose conclusion was that he must never call profane what the Lord has created clean; invited by the Spirit to go down and out with these three men, these three doubtless threatening strangers, yet to go with them without hesitation; and accompanied by “some of the believers from Joppa,” and perhaps for the reasoning that there’s safety in numbers: Peter left Joppa to travel with people who had the power and authority to crucify him, to enter a city that was foreign and a household that was unimaginable, all to interact with a people whose very existence he had, just days earlier, considered profane.

This we also know: that no harm came him. On the contrary, he was welcomed in and invited to stay for several days, this once unimaginable thing (a centurion’s household) now as home to him.

And it’s this: it’s this that invites me into the story. It’s this in the story that has me hard-pressed. I mean, it would be difficult for me to recover a sense of someone else being profane. It would be difficult for me to feel truly vulnerable to someone else’s decision as to whether or not to overpower me (a privilege I thank God for—that my life is mostly secure). It’s *not* difficult for me, however, to imagine the strange feeling Peter must have felt as a guest in the centurion’s home. To be a guest in someone’s home: it can be a challenge you meet only by grace.

You may know, I’m on the board of the Monterey News, which meets every couple months and always in a different home of the several board members. This, as I understand it, is so we can get to know each other better, based on the thought that there’s hardly a better way to get to know someone else than to enter into how they live.

Incidentally, I admire the way my kids and their friends used to do it, when they were younger: a friend would come over and, sooner or later, they’d end up in the boys’ bedroom, and often with the purpose of seeing their bed sheets. Evidently, these are the most revealing things about a person. For some kids, it was a beeline: in through the front door and upstairs to see the bed sheets, the question before them, this most pressing question: what is my friend Toby, what is my friend Jack, all about?

Well, we of the Monterey News board aren’t quite so uninhibited as that. We tend to stop in the common rooms, with maybe an individual trip to the bathroom. And, again, as a practice, I like this, for it is indeed good to practice at ascertaining another household’s customs and joining in them as best you can. Shall I take off my shoes, or leave them on? Shall I help myself to something

to drink, or wait to be served? Shall I sit here or there, or should I not sit at all? And, of course, it's great when joining someone else's way is easy; it's perhaps more wonderful when it's not.

You know, it surprises me, whenever I think on it, that in such a small town we'd need to be intentional about getting to know our neighbors from the inside out. It surprises me how seldom it is that we find ourselves in someone else's home: someone who's not in our closest circle of friends.

Huh.

Due to the Hubble telescope, I know what space gas looks like. Due to astrophysics, I know what energy looks like. Due to the Internet, I know how the Zulu people dress. But I can't picture my next-door neighbor's living room.

How did this come to be?

Cornelius and Peter overcame fear and prejudice to come together and commune in the Lord. They also overcame a much more common thing, the vulnerability as being a guest in each other's home. And it's this: it's this that I think is the most significant part of the encounter between Cornelius and Peter. Not the theological insight of Peter, which shockingly broke through every national boundary—but with which, now, we're quite comfortable; and not the baptism of Cornelius, by which began a universal church; but this, which is twofold, Cornelius' inviting Peter into his home and Peter's accepting the invitation—for by inviting Peter in, Cornelius was entrusting this stranger with himself and was risking that he might be found wanting, might be judged unacceptable, might be rejected all together; and by Peter's coming in, Peter was entrusting to this man his own safety and wellbeing. Truly, by this mutual welcoming, each is blessed. By this self-giving entering into the other's space, the world as they each knew it was transformed, even reconciled.

Today, cross a threshold that unnerves you a bit to cross.

Today, enter a space you can hardly even imagine in the faith that the Holy Spirit yet dwells therein.

Today, knock on a door behind which you hear coming footsteps, though you can't guess what you'll see should that door be opened to you. Who knows? You might just make a new friend as Jesus does with the likes of us.

Thanks be to God.