

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
April 28, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Text--Acts 11: 11-18

Having subscribed just to basic cable service, there are things that I miss. Like the "Daily Show" with Jon Stewart and "The Colbert Report." Luckily, people post excerpts on Facebook from time to time. A segment I saw yesterday was an interview by Colbert of retired Bishop Gene Robinson, who is promoting a new book.

Colbert played the straight Catholic boy to the hilt and, after, taking a few jabs at Anglicans, asked the usual questions. First, about passages in Leviticus. "Did God have a bad day when he wrote that?" he asked. Bishop Robinson responded, "No, it wasn't God. It was the person who wrote it who had the bad day." He went on to say that one good thing about living now is that we are learning new ways of understanding scripture.

The next question was whether sexual orientation is a choice. Colbert answered this for himself by drawing a parallel with people who are left-handed.

Another question was not so typical. "Is being Episcopalian a choice?" Colbert asked. The bishop said it was the best choice in the world. "It's like AP [advanced placement] religion. We get to use our brains." Quite a plug for the Episcopal Church!

I was interested in the roars of approval that came from the crowd. Yes, I know it is a studio audience that has cue cards for laughter and applause. Still it sounded very energetic, hopefully another indicator that boundaries are being crossed.

In our text from Acts this morning, Peter is crossing a boundary--not a sexuality boundary but a huge one. One that turns history upside down and sets the course for Jesus' command to spread the Good News to all. This story is so important that we hear it twice. Last year we heard Peter's actual experience as he carries the Gospel to the world beyond Jerusalem, preaching, teaching, and healing. He is resting on the rooftop in the bright sun of Joppa when the vision comes to him not once, but three times. It is the great sheet-like thing unfolding before him, filled with all kinds of animals. A voice tells him to eat, but he, a Jew who observes the Law, refuses to eat what the Law calls profane. But the voice admonishes him, "what God has made clean you shall not call profane."

Almost immediately, as he is undoubtedly wondering what this meant, he was called to Caesarea by Cornelius. A Roman centurion. A gentile. Cornelius, too, had a vision that told him to send for Peter for a message that would save him and his household.

Peter no sooner began to preach than he witnessed the Spirit falling upon the Gentiles. The same Spirit that fell upon those gathered in Jerusalem not so long before. And the vision began to come clear. God intends walls to come down, boundaries to be crossed. The Good News is for all people. This is a radical conversion experience for Peter, the Rock.

The second time we hear the story is in Peter's retelling to the leaders of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem. It is interesting that they are not concerned that Peter was preaching to Gentiles but that he ate with them, overturning their deep conviction about how to be acceptable to God. They listened to Peter tell them about this same Spirit and his question, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" It was God who was doing a new thing. God, not Peter. They did not argue. They were silent, then accepting.

Some say that sexual orientation is our last barrier. Our society has seen, in the last fifty or so years, the Civil Rights movement, women's rights, and, now, states passing equality in marriage laws.

This next week marks the 50th anniversary of the Children's March for desegregation in Birmingham. More than 1,000 school children marched. Hundreds were arrested, others faced police dogs and fire hose blasts, but the public attention created forward movement.

And yet, this very spring a southern town continues its practice of holding two proms--one for whites, one for blacks. This is "justified" by beliefs that the two groups have different tastes in music and styles of dancing. Two young women have now gotten support and money to offer an alternative, inclusive prom.

There has been a sea change in the lives of women since the early 1970s in business, the professions, and the church. And yet, pay inequities and glass or stained glass ceilings remain to say nothing of the rape culture that is alive and well with our young people: Steubenville, and the two teenage women who took their own lives after being gang raped and subsequently harassed and humiliated on social media.

For gays and lesbians, there have been great strides in public opinion, laws, and some of our churches, but the struggle continues. I am looking forward to Tuesday evening when Pastor Dennis Hill addresses sexuality and slavery at the make-up session for the Lenten Soup and Study program.

It seems to me that our churches have the opportunity to lead the way in inclusion and just treatment. We have such examples: Peter, who overcame his own deeply-seated barriers and crossed boundaries letting God be God and the Spirit do her work.

And Jesus, who gave that new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." This is how one follows Jesus, becomes a disciple. And Jesus' life showed that this went

beyond just the inner circle. He demonstrated the way, the new thing as he sat at table with sinners, the outcast, and the "other."

We, in the church, are good at caring for one another--celebrating together, sharing joys and sorrows. We are good at being "family" to one another. We find acceptance here, identity. We can count on one another.

I wonder, though, what would happen if we got better at spreading this beyond the walls of our churches and into the wider community and the world? For you see, we have a tendency to draw lines, even when we don't realize it. Lines that serve to define who's in and who's out. It's a human trait--wanting to be with people like us.

But that is not the new thing God showed to Peter in Joppa that hot, mid-day on the roof. Peter did not stay in Jerusalem--or in Joppa--waiting for people to come to him. No, he went out seeking others, taking the Good News of God's love to them.

Our world as it is is not the world God intends for us. It is our job to hear God's voice, to let the Spirit move in and around us to bring that new thing about. Not just by giving money to help those less fortunate. But by speaking out against the systems of injustice that prevent that better world. It is our job to do more than simply welcome those who come to our doors--more even than inviting those who are like us. It is our job to think carefully about what message we give to others.

Imagine with me a wave of love and caring expanding and expanding with no walls to contain it, flowing over and around every living creature in a current of love and acceptance. "I give you anew commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another. just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

May it be so.