

The Impulse to Withhold

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 13, 2012

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 10.44-48;
 Psalm 98;
 1 John 5.1-6;
 John 15.9-17

Reading Scripture is like any cross cultural encounter. One moment you bump up against a practice or attitude that is so strange you wonder how people can believe such things. The next moment you find something so familiar you might as well be looking in a mirror. This story from Acts chapter 10 moves us back and forth between each of those experiences. It opens as two men each have a vision. Cornelius is a Roman Centurion who is described as a devout man who honored God along with his whole household, who gave generously to the poor, and prayed constantly to God. He has a vision in which he is told to send for Simon Peter. The next day Peter goes up onto a roof to pray. We are told that he is hungry and while he waits for food to be prepared he falls into a trance and sees a vision of his own.

The next part falls into the category of “how can they believe such things.” In the vision a sheet falls from heaven and is filled with animals of every kind. Details about these animals are given that might be lost on us until you compare those details to the dietary laws of the Hebrew scripture. You realize that Peter is being told in this vision to kill and eat food that is not kosher. Food that is unclean. Food that has never crossed his lips before. He is offended at the suggestion and repulsed at the idea. This repulsion in Peter is so strong that the vision repeats itself three times and each time concludes with the words, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

We may be puzzled by what seems such a strange practice – this careful separating of foods – completely foreign to us as Gentiles who do not keep kosher and do not quite understand why one would. But for Peter, who

has carefully followed the dietary laws as a part of his devotion, it is this vision that is so puzzling. And as he tries to make sense of it the men sent by Cornelius appear. They invite him to the home of Cornelius which is equally unthinkable to Peter. On religious grounds he would not go into a home that does not keep kosher. On political grounds he would not go into the home of a Roman soldier, an enforcer of his people's occupation. But the words from his vision echo in his mind: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And so he goes and he hears about Cornelius' vision and he enters his home and he preaches to the whole household the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our story for today picks up at precisely this place. And it's here (once you know that context) that we could just as well be looking into a mirror. The ones who came with Peter – themselves kosher-keeping Jews – are astounded when they see that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles. We may not fully understand why the Gentiles would seem so far beyond the pale (being Gentiles and all) but this impulse to withhold God's blessing and affirmation from those who offend us is probably more familiar than we would like to admit. Think about those whom you deem beyond the pale on political or religious grounds. Fill in the blank. "They were astounded to see that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on those....

.... left wing liberal democrats redefining all that is sacred and holy
or

....right wing conservative republicans trying to legislate bigotry
Shifting to local worship dynamics: "They were astounded to see that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on those....

....worshipping with screens and praise bands

or

....worshipping with liturgy and organ

The mirror being held up to us today cuts across political and religious divides and clearly crosses culture and time.

The impulse to withhold affirmation, blessing, generosity, grace - it is deep in the human heart and all of our texts for today are seeking to shake us from our stingy, critical ways. I want to acknowledge a place of conflict that lives in me whenever I am drawn down this road of reflection. I am

cautious about any call to unity that seeks to silence resistance or squelch prophetic action. I was poking a little fun with the categories I chose before: the left wing liberal democrat vs. the right wing conservative republican – the contemporary vs. liturgical worship. To state things in such an obviously polarizing way diminishes a little the serious issues of justice, holiness, theology that go into all of these political and liturgical spectrums. The call toward a spirit of generosity and grace does not demand that we relative all values and stifle all dialogue and debate. It's about *how* we stand for what we believe and what we do with those who stand in a different place.

Our Scripture today is about the character and nature of God as One who loves beyond measure. We are the ones who place limits and define people by a single action, a political opinion, or a religious preference and then put them in a box and write them off. God is the one who sees the worth of a human soul beneath the rhetoric, the belief system, the history and reaches out with grace. And so Peter, who probably never set foot in a Gentile home before, stays for several days to receive the hospitality and gracious welcome of these ones he once deemed unclean. The depth of intervention required for Peter's conversion here and the sheer length of his stay is evidence for why efforts for peace and reconciliation cannot be achieved with a simple flash of conviction. It takes time to change our impulses. And it requires that we sit face to face.

When I think about why I find the work of restorative circles so compelling it is what happens when time is spent with the second of the three questions asked in a restorative circle: "What were you looking for when you chose to act?" If you are trying to restore a relationship after someone has offended you or violated you in some way, this second question is critical. It is a very intentional re-framing of a question that might first come out as, "Why would you do such a thing?" or, "What were you thinking?" When you ask instead, "What were you looking for when you choose to act?" it makes an opening to look beneath the history, the rhetoric, the belief system. This is where you see the human being trying in perhaps very flawed ways to get what it is that they need. It's where we get a glimpse of how God might be seeing this one before us. Once you see

each other on that level you can begin to build some bridges that cross the barriers that divide.

A couple of years ago I learned about an effort at Auburn Theological Seminary in NYC. My friend, Shari Brink, was director of development at that time and she was deeply involved in a project there called Face to Face/Faith to Faith. The website describes the work in this way: Since 2001, the program has “brought together hundreds of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim teenagers from Northern Ireland, the Middle East, South Africa, and the US to develop a new generation of leaders able to negotiate a multifaith global society.”¹ The belief that launched this project is that peace is possible but only as we come to see each other face to face and see and hear what is at the heart of our faith, what makes us human, and what unites us in our humanity. Shari has shared stories over the years of the incredible courage and insight and wisdom that these young adults bring back with them to the places where they live. And it gives me hope that God’s Spirit continues to be poured out on the ones we have written off but that God continues to love.

And the hope of the gospel of John today is that as *we* receive God’s love we will abide in it. There is a lot going on in both the Gospel and Epistle lessons today. But I want to look at just one aspect of them: it is the linkage in the passages between receiving God’s love and being obedient to God’s commandments. It’s an interesting linkage when Jesus makes the claim that we are to consider ourselves friends and not servants of God. Servants are obedient, dogs are obedient. When I think about people who demand obedience, I think about people who are on serious power trips. Obedience is typically predicated on fear of punishment or on the effort to secure some kind of reward. Either way it seems antithetical to the idea of unconditional love or to the idea of friendship.

But if you can press past the language of obedience and focus instead on the concept of letting the love you profess become the love you embody, then you can see the vital connection we need to make here. In many ways my quick analysis of obedience probably places me squarely within my

¹ See <http://www.auburnseminary.org/facetoface>

western culture and my Generation X mentality. Nonetheless, I suspect that Jesus makes this move toward the language of friendship precisely because he too sees the limitations in the language of obedience. Jesus wants us to love each other with the same kind of tenacity with which he loved us: refusing to abandon his convictions under threat, refusing to let go of his compassion in the face of violence, refusing to view even his enemies as anything other than the human beings that they are; people whom God has both created and deeply loves.

You can hear this demand for obedience as power play or as invitation. When you accept the invitation to love as Christ loved, you find yourself being pushed in the ways that Peter was pushed in our text from Acts for today. Pushed into situations and relationships you would never choose; pushed to let go of judgments and assessments that feel so right; pushed to move out of the role of critical judge and into the role of hospitable friend.

Folks, I don't know about you, but I have a long way to go on this. But I can also testify that every time I step out of the role of examiner and judge and into the spirit of hospitality and friendship I feel lighter, I feel joy, I feel the love of God moving deeper into my soul the further I extend that love into the world.

I suspect Jesus knew that it worked this way. In the midst of all his instruction, in the center of all this talk of obedience, we read these words: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Thanks be to God!