

A LIVING WORD

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
Fifth Sunday of Easter May 19, 2019
Acts 11:1-18

What are we supposed to do when our personal experience of the world puts us in conflict with our understanding of what Scripture teaches? When we find it impossible to reconcile some difference between the world the Bible describes and the world we encounter every day, how are we supposed to respond? Over the years people of faith have wrestled with such a dilemma and reached different resolutions of the conflict. For some, the fairly simple solution is to subordinate their experience to the wisdom of the Word; they put bumper stickers on their cars that say, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it!” At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who, after anguishing over competing visions of reality, finally choose to abandon the faith, to cast Scripture aside and find new texts and disciplines that align more comfortably with their understanding. But for others – perhaps for many of us here – the dissonance between Scripture and personal experience leads to a profound wrestling with Scripture, to a quest for a deeper understanding.

A fine example of this third way is the story of Floyd Bryant. Like many Americans in the 1950s, especially in the South, Bryant was wrestling with the practice of racial segregation. More particularly, he was struggling to understand what he, as a practicing Christian, should do. Much of the ethos in which he lived, including his church, supported the view that segregation was not only right, but was God’s intention. Then, in 1956 Bryant wrote an article for a Baptist publication about Peter and Cornelius. In it, he described himself as a “sixty-three-year-old white man, a Baptist, and a Southerner,” and then wrote this:

Throughout the first sixty years of my life I never questioned but that Peter’s confession that [God shows no partiality] (Acts 10:34) referred exclusively to the differences among white Christian persons. Neither did I question that segregation was [a supportable Christian concept], and that it referred to the separation of white and Negro people. Three years ago [while reading this story, I found my views] completely transformed. I became convinced that God makes no distinctions among people whatever their race.... I exchanged the former views which I had absorbed from my environment, for the latter views which I learned from the New Testament. I came to understand the meaning of Paul’s plea, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ... transformed by the renewing of your mind, that [you] may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:2)¹

Bryant was not alone in such a transformation. There were a lot of people whose hearts and minds were changed in those days, against remarkable odds. What happened? What caused the change? Writing about Bryant, the late Harvard pastor Peter Gomes provided a helpful answer:

Here we have an instance, and a remarkably vivid one at that, in which the mind and the heart are changed, because scripture requires that *in Christ* minds and hearts be changed – or transformed, in Paul’s language. What is remarkable is that the text itself remains ... unchanged. No new translations have emerged to clarify textual issues. No hidden or lost manuscripts have been unearthed that would unfix long-settled opinion.... What has changed,

¹ Floyd Bryant, as cited by Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1996. Chandler Stokes cited both in a paper presented to the January 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Memphis, Tennessee. This sermon draws on his paper and the conversation that followed his presentation, particularly comments by Luke Timothy Johnson.

however, is the climate of interpretation.... The texts have not changed, but we have, and the world with us. Scripture, like Jesus Christ, may be the same yesterday, today, and forever, but our capacity to read scripture and to [understand] Jesus... and his teachings [are] not.²

Culturally-based interpretations of Scripture have been around since the sacred canons of the faith were first formed, yet over time many of our interpretive assumptions have changed, and we have come to see Scripture in a new light, to understand its claim on us in new ways. American churches have witnessed such new claims in the last 150 years in debates over slavery, over marriage and divorce, over the role of women in the church, and in more recent years over the way Christians understand human sexuality, love, and marriage. In more recent days, though, it seems as though the fear of anything new has been so resurgent that some people have needed to codify into law the old, repressive, culturally-based assumptions. We live in such unsettled times. But codifying the old assumptions into law won't make the tensions go away! It will only exacerbate them.

When one's personal experience of the world comes in conflict with one's understanding of Scripture, something has to give. Either one denies that experience, *or* one discards Scripture and goes with the experience, *or* one wrestles mightily to see if one is reading Scripture rightly. It was the third course that Peter chose as he met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem in our scripture reading today. He came to the elders in Jerusalem to talk about his experience with Cornelius, a Gentile, who happened to be a Roman centurion. It was a very important conversation, in many ways a watershed moment in the development of the early Christian Church.

Up until Peter encountered Cornelius, you see, to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ, one first had to be a Jew. It sounds odd to us today, but the early Church grew as a branch within Judaism. To be a Christian one first had to be a faithful Jew, observant of the Torah and its moral and social distinctions between Jew and Gentile, between clean and unclean, between sacred and profane. Cornelius was the first bona fide non-Jew – the first Gentile – to join the movement.³ And his conversion to the Christian faith raised a lot of questions about the composition of the community of faith: who should be included within the circle? Did the traditional boundary markers still hold? If tradition prevented Jews and Gentiles from associating with each other, what happened when the old distinctions no longer existed? How were they to relate to each other within the new community?⁴

With such important questions floating around, you can understand why Peter caused a stir when he came to Jerusalem to share with the church his experience with Cornelius. The Jewish Christians were disturbed that Peter had abandoned traditional boundaries in carrying the Gospel to a Gentile. Not only had he met with Cornelius; they had engaged in table fellowship. But in response Peter appealed to a compelling personal experience that had caused him to deal with Cornelius differently than Scriptures had taught. He spoke of a dream in which God had come to him, in which God had challenged Peter to think beyond traditional distinctions. Every bit of Peter's past had reinforced the boundary between sacred and profane, between clean and unclean. His parents and teachers had raised him to ask whether the food he was about to eat was kosher, to ask where it had come from and how it had been slaughtered? Says Biblical scholar Carl Holladay:

² Gomes, 99-100. Italics mine.

³ Carl Holladay, in Craddock, Hayes, Holladay and Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, 249.

⁴ Holladay, 249.

And yet the very God who was presumably responsible for having invented these distinctions was commanding him [now, in this dream,] to ignore them. Peter is instructed by God, “kill and eat” (v. 7). Even further, Peter is told, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v. 9). Peter is being told that the distinctions he is used to no longer hold. His universe of meaning is being challenged to the core.⁵

In his vision Peter comes to see a new reality, one that forces him to confront its departure from the reality described in his sacred scripture. He comes to see that the traditional distinctions between Jew and Gentile no longer hold. He comes to see that God gave the Gentiles “the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus” (v. 17). And thus, he is able to see in Cornelius not a Gentile, but simply a brother in Christ.

Peter chose not to abandon his profound personal experience in favor of the weight of Scriptural tradition, and not to abandon that tradition itself because of his experience, but the more challenging third way of wrestling with the implications of his experience in his study and interpretation of Scripture. And he chose to do so in a most responsible way: he took his experience and his new understanding of Scripture back to the church. He said, this is what I have experienced and understood. How do you understand it? With boldness, yet humility, he tested his new convictions within the community of faith.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has written an entire book on Peter’s baptism of Cornelius, and he suggests that this story offers a paradigm for the church’s use and interpretation of scripture. It is clear here, he says, that Peter comes down on the side of compelling personal experience over against the traditional reading of Torah. But reading the story, one is persuaded that Peter’s experience, like most personal experience, is opaque; that is, it is not always crystal clear. Peter initially is confused by his experience, but he entrusts that experience to the community of faith, where it is weighed and measured.⁶

He does so not by naming rational categories or offering tightly-reasoned argument, but by telling a story of his own experience. Says Stephen Jones, it is finally the story, not argumentation, which changes their hearts.

Stories, not arguments, change lives.... Had Peter come to argue theological points with them or debate doctrinal differences, he might not have been able to change their hearts. Generally, arguments tend only to crystallize differences. Debates tend to keep two sides apart. In debates and arguments, there are winners and losers. Peter could have charged angrily into the Jerusalem court and argued, “Is it fair that we keep the gospel to ourselves? Does God not also love the Gentiles? Cannot Gentiles approach God directly without first becoming like us?” One can imagine such an argument going on for days.⁷

Instead, Peter simply shares his story, and leaves it with the faith community in Jerusalem. And what does the community decide? At first, they are speechless. But gradually their silence yields to bewilderment, and in the end, they bravely conclude that God is indeed doing a new thing among them. They say, well, “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life”

⁵ Holladay, 250.

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, in comments made during the January 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast. Cf. note 1. The book on this text is *Scripture and Discernment*, published by Abingdon Press, 1996.

⁷ Stephen D. Jones, “Acts 11:1-18: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 453.

(v. 18). It was a shock, but they got it. God was not locked in old laws and formulations, they concluded; God was out there ahead of them, beckoning them to follow in yet a new direction. The ground of their world trembled a bit in those days as the Spirit moved, and the church was changed forever. Says Holladay,

In the aftermath of Easter, we do well to remind ourselves of the ongoing power of the Easter faith, and that even *its* truth is revealed in stages. Luke [the author of Acts] knows full well that not one, but two conversions occurred in these events: that of Cornelius *and* that of Peter. Peter's world was reconfigured every bit as much as was Cornelius' world, perhaps even more so. Redefining boundaries always generates controversy, especially when they mark off [whole] groups of people from each other. And there is always cause for rejoicing when [boundaries] are erased with such dramatic effect.⁸

God's Word is timeless, friends, not stuck in some particular time. It is a living Word. And that means it sometimes engages us in new ways, pulls us in new directions... at times even 180 degrees from where we were headed. Some years ago, my pastor friend Chandler Stokes said something that made great sense to me, which I have since repeated many times. He said that he had heard someone in a sermon "refer to the gospel as an anchor in one's life and to God as a safe harbor." That may be a helpful metaphor for some, he said, but "I think Luke would disagree. He would prefer to think of the gospel as a keel one sinks deep in the water and of God as the wind."⁹

Our experience of the world is not a threat to Scripture or tradition, nor is Scripture the enemy of our experience and understanding of the world. The Bible lends light and clarity to so many of the dark edges of our experience; it keeps us steady in uncertain currents; it is our unfailing rule of faith and practice. It is also a *living* Word for us, a Word that asks of us regular reading and interpretation and prayerful study, so that we may rediscover its truth and authority in our own time. It testifies to a living God, who has shaped us in the past, and who is our hope for years to come... the God who is out there ahead of us... always ahead of us... bidding us to come, to test our understandings against the stories of our lives, and to trust this God who makes all things – *all things* – new.

⁸ Holladay, 250.

⁹ Chandler Stokes, cf. footnote 1.