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Easter 6 – Acts 10:(1-43) 44-48

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Do you know that your perspective in life can make all the difference in the world? Take, for example the little boy who got lost at the YMCA and found himself walking into the women's locker room. When he was spotted, the room burst into shrieks, with ladies grabbing towels and running for cover. The little boy watched in amazement and then asked, "What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a little boy before?"

And then there was the young mother who helped make Meals on Wheels deliveries to some older homebound folks in her neighborhood. Her 4 year old daughter went with her when she delivered meals. During the stops to these homes, the little girl saw the various accoutrements of people growing older – canes, walkers, wheelchairs - all which unfailingly intrigued her. One day the mother found her daughter staring at a pair of dentures soaking in a glass. The mother says, "As I braced myself for the inevitable barrage of questions, my daughter merely turned to me and whispered, "The tooth fairy will never believe this!"

Or take the 8 year old girl who listened as the TV program she was watching was interrupted with the news that a well-known black leader by the name of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and killed. Sensitive and easily distressed by violence, the girl asked her parents: "Was that man killed because he was black?" Her parents hesitated, and then tentatively said, "No".

At age 8, I didn't really believe my parents' answer to that question. I am still saddened and distressed by the violence in our world. Physical force and soul force clash on a daily basis. Often it looks like the power of physical force, of violence, is stronger than "soul force" – a term used by Dr. King to describe the use of peaceful, non-violent resistance. His dream – "that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character", has not yet been fully realized.

PERSPECTIVE. Life is largely a matter of perspective.

We heard the ending of a most important story in today's first reading from Acts. The story is sometimes called "the Gentile Pentecost". It is such an important story about the birth and growing pains of the early church and the spread of the Christian faith that we need to hear it from the beginning. It describes God at work, changing human perspectives, pushing people beyond what seems proper, predictable, and possible in loving others and dealing with differences.

Let me recap the story, which begins in Acts, chapter 10.

As the story opens, we meet Cornelius, a Roman army officer. He is not Jewish, but he respects God deeply, gives generously to charity, and has a robust prayer life. And he's having dreams.

At the same time as we meet Cornelius, Peter, the leader of the apostles, is seeing things, too. He's up on the roof praying when he has a vision. He sees a white sheet coming down from heaven containing every known animal, clean and unclean. He hears a voice say, "*Get up, Peter, kill and eat*". (And you thought your dreams were weird?). Peter rebels and resists – "WHAT? You've got to be kidding me. I don't do that! We can't do that! Kill and eat something not kosher? We have strict dietary laws!". The message comes a 2nd time, and this time the voice says: "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane*". Not once, but three times Peter gets this same mysterious message, and then the sheet suddenly is taken back up to heaven.

Well, in the meantime, Cornelius has sent messengers to find Peter, which is what Cornelius was instructed to do in *his* dream. They arrive with a knock at Peter's door, looking for him. Though Peter is not sure what exactly is going on or where he's headed, he knows by now that God is involved in these strange happenings. God is in fact directing the show! Peter goes with Cornelius' messengers to Cornelius' house. The two men talk openly, sharing their dreams. Cornelius says to Peter, I was instructed in my dream to send for you. I want to listen to what the Lord has put on your heart to tell me.

What follows Peter's meeting with Cornelius is Peter's preaching one of the most powerful sermons in history. "***God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from – if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open. The Message God sent to the children of Israel – that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again – well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.***" (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*).

It was a shocking declaration then, and it is just as shocking today, especially for those who believe they have the "inside track" to God's goodness. Before Peter has even finished his sermon, the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his family, showing everyone that these Gentile believers in Jesus – who are not Jews - are full members of the family of faith. "*So there's nothing to stop us from baptizing them*", says Peter, "*for they have received the Holy Spirit just like we have*". Peter baptizes them, Cornelius invites Peter to stay the night at his house, and hospitality seals their friendship and their kinship.

It was not exactly smooth and easy sailing for Peter and the church in its early days, despite the fact that the Holy Spirit was at work breaking down barriers. When Peter gets back home, he has some answering to do, because his brethren – Jesus' followers who were Jews - are not happy that Peter even went to a Gentile's home. Peter tells the Jerusalem disciples his experience with Cornelius. "*Who was I, that I could hinder God?*" he says to them. I can just imagine him saying, "I couldn't help it. The Spirit made me do it!" After a LONG bit of stunned and silent shock, a word of praise emerges: "*God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.*"

This story may not seem all that earth shattering to us. But if you don't stumble over the line "***God plays no favorites,***" in the NRSV – "***God shows no partiality***" - you're not

paying attention to the jagged edge where the church and the world meet. The very phrase is audacious. GOD HAS NO FAVORITES? God shows NO partiality? It's beyond our human perspective and day to day lived reality, because there is immense partiality and privilege at work in the world, keeping us separated from one another, causing enmity and strife. This story flies directly in the face of our accepted, socially and culturally contrived barriers.

What Cornelius and Peter did changed the course of Christianity forever. ***They experienced a radically rearranged, Spirit-inspired change of perspective – moving beyond their limited human perspectives, to see life from God's perspective.*** Peter's initial resistance and then relinquishment of a cherished, religious boundary opened the door for the reconciling work of Jesus to spread through the whole world. It took the Spirit, working through the active imaginations of Cornelius and Peter to move them beyond the barriers of ethnic and religious exclusivity, into the wideness of God's mercy for all.

Jesus' resurrection propels us to live into a new perspective – God's kingdom perspective – which sets no boundaries around who God loves, to whom God offers new life, through whom God will speak, and whom God will use to achieve Divine purposes. Our part is to get out of the Spirit's way and stop drawing circles that keep people out. We serve a boundary-breaking Lord. When Jesus burst through the door of his 3 day prison tomb, he shattered all the barriers that separate humanity from God and us from one another – pride, fear, greed, prejudice, and all manner of sin, evil, and death. There are no insiders and outsiders, no deserving or undeserving ones in God's kingdom of love – there are only beloved children of God.

Still, it just seems to be human nature that we continue to insist on trying to keep those human-made boundaries in place, to focus on the differences and divisions that separate us from one another. But that is not what God wants, and it is not God's way. Jesus blasted out of that tomb forever, and is not going back in – and truth be told, neither are we!

The work that's left for us to do as disciples of the risen Lord is to look around and take in the expansive view of this world that God created and loves – and let God change our perspective, pray for God to change our perspective. We are called to venture beyond our comfort zones to where amazing things can happen when we welcome one another as gifts from God! No one of us or group of us is more loved by God than any other. We are all equally favored.

And you know, this sounds to me a whole lot like the world which a mother or father inhabits. Parents, you know you don't love one of your children more than another. You love them uniquely, the way each one needs to be loved. Yes, sometimes one child may be a bit easier to love than their brother or sister. That means you work a little harder to love them – the willful one, the shy one, the moody one, the differently gifted one, the wandering or lost one. Parents know that they are called daily to give love away – lavishly, unselfishly, unconditionally.

This story of Peter and Cornelius challenges all of us to step over borders and push through boundaries that keep us from loving with the lavish, unselfish, unconditional love of Jesus. We are called to seek commonalities. To respect and honor differences. To look for the spirit of God at work in the lives of people who are not like us. To push ourselves to give and receive hospitality as a sign of the reign of God, where all are called to the table by God's grace. What we can learn from Peter and Cornelius is that not only are we in equal need of God's love and grace, but we also need one another – the rich diversity of difference - so that our vision of God's grace can expand, because there is so much more of God's grace and self-giving love than any one of us can begin to understand from our own limited and narrow perspective.

My hope and prayer is that we will continue to grow as disciples who dare to cross boundaries, for the sake of sharing in word and deed God's all-embracing love. I pray we will become disciples who find ourselves asking with anticipation, "What is God going to do next?" In truth - I have no idea! But I do know that each morning, I pray to greet whatever the day may bring, from God's perspective, the Resurrection perspective. I know I can expect to see signs of hope, new life, goodness, joy, and love that God is forever bringing to bear. Usually those signs of goodness and new life will come in ways I never would have imagined. Often they come through people – both familiar and strange to me.

We are Easter people and the tomb is empty – Alleluia! Let's be about the resurrection work of loving as if there were no boundaries – because from God's perspective, there aren't any boundaries. There is only a world longing to be held, and loved, and brought home to God. Amen.

