

Who Can Withhold the Water? Acts 10:34-48

I cry over almost anything. Good TV commercials; movies; babies being baptized; a good benediction; another crier - any of those can turn the water works. Books have even made me cry. A friend I truly adore told me years ago about her favorite book. It was a book with such a meaningful story line that she told me she would read it every couple of years. I have never re-read a book in my life, unless you count the Bible, which I don't. Every time the subject of good books would come up, there was my friend, quick to remind us what book we should all read. I always quietly nodded in agreement, not because I had read the book, but because I had seen the movie adaption of the book and loved the movie. It's the same thing right?

But what they say really is often true, the book was way better than the movie. I got so caught up in this book, that when I finished *A Prayer for Owen Meaney*, I cried for a whole afternoon. I cried because of the beautiful ending to a beautiful story. I cried because I got caught up in the story and now the book was done. I cried because of a boy's dream that turned into a man's destiny, flawed and rocky and bumpy. And in the end, like most really good stories, there was death; but that death gave life.

Surely we all have our favorite books, or our favorite movies. And the story is what draws us in. The story is what keeps us captivated. The story is what stops time around us; it makes us forget our troubles and we are invited into a life that is not our own. A good book on tape will make the drive to the beach seem like nothing at all. A good story gets told over and over, perhaps even a little differently each time but told so many times that almost everyone seems to know it.

Our scripture for Sunday Jan 8th falls at the end of such a good story. It is a story that continues to unfold, even today, even now. It is a story of a story, the story of the power in telling the good news of Jesus the Christ and the transformation that takes place in his name.

Peter the disciple now turned apostle; Peter the impetuous; Peter the denier; Peter the mumblor of tent building on the mount of transfiguration; is now Peter the leader. Through this story of Peter we are witnesses to God's ability to break down in order to build up. To talk about Peter's story, we will have to remember his context. He's a first century Jewish fisherman, now turned

itinerant preacher and teacher of the this new Way. He's the storyteller of a widow who lost her coin; the storyteller of a Samaritan who follows God with his heart better than the rabbis; he's the storyteller, not only the stories Jesus told, **but now he's the storyteller of an even better story... the story of Jesus himself.**¹

This new story of Jesus Christ **is** transforming lives. That is what the book of Acts is all about - the power of telling this story - the power of God's revelation in Jesus for the whole world. It's been a rollercoaster of surprises ever since Christ rose. First there was the actual resurrection that apparently no one really had expected. Read the end of any of the gospels for more on that. Then there was the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And just yesterday Peter was enjoying the sea breeze in Joppa and had another revelation of significant proportions dropped on him. And this revelation hit him in the gut, literally.

Remember that the context of his vision is important. 1st century Jews may have disagreed about whether Jesus was the Messiah; they may have not all seen eye to eye on the resurrection or whether John the Baptist was the new Elijah; - but one thing they all agreed on was no shellfish and no grilled pork lion. The dietary laws of the Jewish faith were a no-negotiating kind of thing. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and *order your Hawaiian pizza without the ham.*

The idea of what was clean to eat and what wasn't clean to eat was part of the larger expectation on Jewish table fellowship. The people you sit down and eat with are family. And the Jewish family has been set apart by God, called to be distinct, to bear witness to God's special love and grace to the world and therefore cannot compromise with the world.²

Jewish dietary laws weren't about being snobby, God had hand-picked Israel to be the nation that was a light that showed God's grace and justice.

In Peter's vision at Joppa, a giant sheet is lowered from the heavens, and everything this good Jew has never been allowed to eat, God says, "The rules have changed. Eat and have your fill." That's of course my paraphrase. Peter is shocked. Appalled. *'God, you're telling me that everything we've thought was unclean, unfit to eat, is now okay to eat?'*

¹ NT Wright, Acts for Everyone (Part 1) Westminster John Knox Press 2008, pg. 167

² *ibid*

God's 'yes,' to Peter's 'huh' leaves him as puzzled as ever. "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." But Peter's confusion over food ends up being a piece of an even larger revelation. Even as he's trying to make sense of his afternoon- expanded buffet, three men have come from Caesarea to invite Peter to Cornelius's house.

First, it is the revelation that "What God has made clean you must not profane," and then there is a Gentile and not just any Gentile, but a Roman soldier (Acts tells us) requesting, commanding(?) that Peter come to his house. Cornelius as a centurion was in charge of a cohort - roughly 500 soldiers or so - which meant that he had all kinds of power and it used to being obeyed. Cornelius is a man who, "is completely involved in an oppressive political system." Right away we should be cautious that this kind of man is concerned with Peter.

Cornelius' request to meet with Peter right on the heels of the rules of table fellowship having been broken down - Peter's head must have been spinning. If God is breaking down, what could God also be building up? Do we see how, Cornelius is also just like the Magi, a racial, religious and vocational outsider,³ that he like the wise men, comes seeking out to know, *who is this Christ?*

Well, it turns out that Cornelius is a sympathizer. (*I told you this was a good story*). He is what Luke would term a God-fearer. He was a Gentile who, "... was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God." Which is odd. Why would Cornelius, a man with power, prestige, position; of what use is the Jewish God to him? The Romans had plenty of gods, Caesar among them. If Cornelius has his pick of gods, why would he be interested in the Jewish God unless, unless there is transformation with this God?

Was Cornelius ready to convert? Because as a Roman centurion Cornelius after all was a Gentile. Non-Jews weren't permitted in the Temple. You couldn't be part of the Jewish people and therefore part of the promise of the Jewish God unless you became Jewish. Cornelius he was always going to be an outsider.

³ Doug Bratt, http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-day-c/?type=old_testament_lectionary

And then the rules changed. Jesus became the new Temple, the place where God dwelled among God's people. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. And on the third day, the rules changed. Peter had a vision from the Spirit about table fellowship; and the rules changed. Paul attacked believers under the banner of law and order. And then came a blinding light, and the rules changed.

Cornelius tells Peter, I've had a vision too. Oh my the rules have changed. And God said I should send for you - and this is where Peter realizes, oh my goodness - don't call unclean what I have made clean - the revelation must have hit Peter in his head and heart. Like Paul, the scales fall from Peter's eyes; God's ability to break down in order to build up.

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to (Cornelius, his household and the believers Peter brought with him - then Peter began to speak to) them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, **preaching peace by Jesus Christ** - he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about **doing good and healing all** who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Peter owns his story. He doesn't need to tell Cornelius the story of the Samaritan or the widow's lost coin now, he just tells the story of his Lord. He tells the story of God's plan being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. For Peter to be standing in Cornelius's house, *admitting the God shows no partiality, that God shows no favoritism is world changing.* "[Peter's] family and synagogue had, after all, raised him to believe that God does show favoritism. Peter had always believed that the Jews were somehow special to God.

Sure, they recognized that God might show occasional love to a few Gentiles. However, the Jews also always maintained that God's favoritism dictated that those outsiders had to act like Jews in order to fully experience God's mercy."⁴

But Cornelius doesn't have to act like a Jew, in order to receive God's blessing. The story has a better ending than that. God isn't expecting everyone to act like Jews or to be converted. What God is expecting is that when you hear the good news of Jesus, that you will be transformed.

Whatever the rules were, they've changed. How we think the world should operate isn't how God has set it in motion. All too often, as the church, **we are like our 1st century Jewish brothers and sisters, who thought the doors couldn't open any wider for new comers, without threatening the whole movement.**

But Christ wasn't preaching peace, doing good and healing in order show the insiders mercy and grace; he's doing those things because God shows no partiality. God sends rain on the good and the bad. What God meant from **the beginning** was fully realized in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Rachel Held Evans says, "It seems those most likely to miss God's work in the world are those most convinced they know exactly what to look for, the ones who expect God to play by the rules."

If the gospel teaches us anything it is that God doesn't play by the rules. There is something powerful about telling this story of Jesus;

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter **were astounded** that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

⁴ Doug Bratt, http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-day-c/?type=old_testament_lectionary

Can you imagine if the Spirit were to show up in the middle of our telling the story? Well I think the Spirit already does. There is power in the telling of Christ's story - just ask these elders who will lead our church; just ask anyone who has had a child; just ask anyone who has been bold enough to claim that Christ is the very center of who they are.

Because if the book of Acts is right, the Spirit's advent is sure. When the story of Jesus is told, something transformative happens. Firey tongues. Conversions of the heart and life; blinding lights and new dinner menus. And baptisms. Baptisms of forgiveness and new life! How in the world can we possibly hold back the water?!?!?

Benediction

We should expect then, that as we tell this story, there will be transformation. There will be a better ending than we can ever imagine. "It is not the case, then, that God 'accepts us as we are'. He *invites* us as we are; but responding to that invitation always involves the complete transformation which is acted out in **repentance, forgiveness, baptism,** and receiving the **spirit.**" NT Wright