

When the Talking Goes on Too Long

Will you pray with me...? God of silence..... may the words of my mouth not get in the way of the meditations of these gathered hearts and may it all be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, there's a bit of context that's needed to set the stage for Peter's big sermon in the book of Acts. It may sound pretty good standing all on its own – but his sermon doesn't appear out of thin air.

It comes out of experience. A surprising vision. A changed heart.

So, in the book of Acts so far, Peter has been traveling – spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the triumph of God over death.

In the leadup to this sermon, Peter's traveling to Caesarea.

And in Caesarea lives a man named Cornelius – a Roman army officer.

Cornelius and all in his household prayed regularly to the God of Israel and gave generously to those in need.

Cornelius already had a close relationship with the Jewish God – which is rather unusual for a Roman officer, by the way.

The first person to receive a vision in this chapter of Acts is Cornelius – a Roman army officer.

And in his vision, God tells Cornelius to send for Peter, because Cornelius' prayers have been answered.

So, Cornelius sends a couple of men out to track Peter down.

Meanwhile, Peter arrives in Caesarea and he's tired. He's hungry. But first things first, he heads up onto a rooftop to pray.

And probably to take a nap.

During his prayers – he falls into a trance and receives a vision of his own.

And then things get a little odd.

In his vision, animals of all kinds – those with four feet - reptiles – birds – all descend from the heavens on a big sheet.

This vision is SUPER WEIRD. But important. Because as the animals descend, Peter hears a voice that says, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.

And Peter is like, whoa, no way! That stuff isn’t kosher. It’s against the laws of my people to eat those kinds of animals.

And the voice says again, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

This happens three times – and not once does Peter end up any less confused.

So, he gathers himself up, wondering what the heck a vision like that could mean, heads downstairs, and suddenly he runs smack into the men Cornelius sent for him.

There’s an exchange of pleasantries and an offer of welcome at Cornelius’ home.

Peter very dutifully notes that it’s against the law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit their home (an exaggeration of actual practices of the time, by the way) – what about the unclean food??

and suddenly his vision makes sense.

“God has shown me I should not call anyone profane or unclean!”

And so he goes to Cornelius’ house. And there he begins to preach the Good News that we heard read this morning.

I think Peter has a pretty rote speech at this point – not that routine is bad – he’s preaching an important word about Jesus of Nazareth!

But the significant part of this particular sermon is the first line and who he’s preaching this sermon to.

The work of Peter, of the first apostles, so far has been to go to Jewish communities spreading the news of Jesus Christ.

Suddenly, that mission is blown wide open.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

God shows no partiality.

Anyone who fears God more than they fear evil forces and temptations of the world – anyone who does what is right – treats God’s creation with love and generosity – anyone who does those things is acceptable to God.

This is a foundational moment in the book of Acts and all of Christian history.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is available to all.

Now – with Joy Harjo’s words echoing in my mind, “Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters” I want to make a brief, and important, jump.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is available to all – God’s love and acceptance is available to all – but I don’t believe that justifies forced conversion or our long history of colonial powers using Christianity as a driving motive for their interests in the world.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is available to all, but it doesn’t need to be forced by ME on anyone.

And to get to that conclusion, I simply listen for one more verse in this text past where we stopped reading.

Acts 10:43:

“While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.”

While Peter was still speaking – the Holy Spirit fell upon all who gathered.

While Peter was still speaking – God moved. And God did a thing.

Sometimes the talking, the sermons, go on too long.

And God – the Spirit – interrupts.

God doesn’t always need our words. Our talking to fill the silence.

God can work without them – indeed, sometimes all our talking gets in the way of God working in us.

St. Francis said, “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

Sometimes, words are necessary. And sometimes, most times, they shouldn't be our first response.

When words become our first response – all we are doing is reacting.

All the time – constantly reacting – or preventing someone else from holding or using the space around us.

Like God, for instance.

Richard Rohr writes, "Silence surrounds every "I know" with a humble and patient "I don't know."

I can forgive – actually I can really empathize – with Peter's excitement and his rambling tongue.

He just witnessed a new side of God's mission in the world – and it blows his world right open.

My first reaction would be to talk about it too. Loudly. And at length.

But what if what he needed to do was to just say that first line and then be quiet?

Listen for what those gentiles might say – after all, the Holy Spirit was falling upon them.

Rohr continues, "Silence protects the autonomy and dignity of events, persons, animals, and all created things."

My friends – silence protects you.

It creates a humbleness in your heart that makes space for God in your life.

Silence allows your mind to stay present to your heart – a critical thing if any of us are going to be healers in this hurting world.

Because here's the thing about our God who shows no partiality to anyone – it means extending a welcome that is way bigger than anything that keeps us comfortable.

It means always creating "new wes" that look a whole lot different than the usual "us" and it's going to push us past our comfort points.

Extending that kind of welcome that Peter's vision espouses is going to be hard.

And so we're going to have to do some inner work so that we're open to the hard stuff when it inevitably comes.

Holding space for contemplation, cultivating inner silence – this is a way to respond to the many gentle warnings in Harjo’s poem,

“Watch your mind. Without training it might run away and leave your heart for the immense human feast set by the thieves of time.”

Our minds are constantly looking to run away and try to capture time. As though there weren’t enough of it. As though we must fill every inch of it with our words, with our unreviewed thoughts.

Our minds are constantly looking for ways to keep us safe. To keep us comfortable. To keep us distracted.

But - your spirit – your beautiful spirit – is waiting to be listened to.

And God is waiting to speak to your spirit.

Unless you quiet your tongue occasionally and regularly, you will never be able to hear it.

“Speak to [your spirit] as you would to a beloved child.”

Be gentle. Use less words. Infuse each one with intention and love.

And when you’re ready to have the party for your returned spirit:

“Remember, keep the speeches short.

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.”

Amen.