

## Peter and Cornelius

The whole book of Acts, but especially this story, makes us wonder what it might mean to say God doesn't change.

There are several bible verses that say God is unchanging.

The hymn Great is Thy Faithfulness has these words:

Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be

What does it mean to say God is unchanging? From today's story, it sure looks like God changed.

We'll talk about what it does mean to say God is unchanging in a bit. But what it doesn't mean is that God won't ever surprise us...shock us even. God can take something we were sure would always be the same, and turn it upside down.

Peter and the other Jewish disciples assumed that God's law would never change. The first part of today's reading goes back to the Jewish food laws in the book of Leviticus...way back in the time of Moses. Some foods were kosher...some were not.

None of the Jewish people could have imagined that those laws would ever not apply. Those laws were their bedrock...God's law is what gave them a solid footing.

Peter is rightfully shocked at this vision. But he doesn't really get it yet.

Up to this point it appears all of the converts to the Way...to what would become Christianity...were Jewish. The apostles didn't quite get that when Jesus commissioned them to preach the good news to the ends of the earth, he didn't mean just the ends of the Jewish world.

Adherence to God's law wasn't really even questioned in the newborn Christian church – it was a way of life so ingrained in them it wouldn't have occurred to them.

But this vision...what can it mean?

Meanwhile, in another town, Cornelius is having his own vision. His is more concrete, but the end game is no less mysterious.

It's not until the two visions come together in Cornelius's home that Peter finally gets it. The vision wasn't really about food...it was about people. God shows no partiality.

Way back in Genesis, when God called Abraham and Sarah and shaped their descendants into the people of Israel, they would be blessed so that in them all the families of the world would be blessed.

And God apparently really meant all.

Here, in Cornelius's living room, Peter sees it. He witnesses the Holy Spirit come upon people who weren't Jewish and who did not follow the law God gave to Israel.

He could see now how God's mission to bless all the families of the earth would play out. The church could not be whole without the Gentiles – the non-Jews.

But this was a hard sell to the rest of the church's leaders. This just seemed too loosey goosey.

If God's law was no longer their solid foundation, how would they find their footing? What would become of them? And besides, God is unchanging, right?

What's unchanging is God's faithfulness...over thousands of years God has been faithful to the mission of blessing and saving and loving and building the kingdom of God for all. *That...*never changed.

Humans just never had the vision to see that. Bit by bit, God drew people along the path of life with God. You'd think that when God became human and was killed and raised from the dead people would no longer be surprised by anything God might do. But we humans catch on slowly.

And the reality is, neither Cornelius nor Peter would have caught on by themselves. Both of their visions had to come together...and out of that, something new was born.

I believe something new is trying to born in the church and in the world today. It was starting before the pandemic but I think the turmoil of the last year is increasing the labor pains, to use Paul's metaphor.

But I don't know exactly what it will look like. I don't think any of us in the church right now really do. And honestly, it sometimes looks more like death. In many churches, numbers are declining and doors are closing. But we serve a God who brings the dead to life, so it's kind of the same thing as birth.

Those of us in the church now only have part of the vision. Like Peter knew the Jewish world, we know the church world. We know the rules, sometimes spoken but often unspoken. We know the rituals. We know the songs...and sometimes don't want to learn new ones.

The other part of the vision is missing. Who is our Cornelius? Who holds the other part of the vision for what the church should be for the world going forward?

Is it the vision of someone who has never set foot in a church building and maybe never will? Is it the vision of one who grew up in the church but left because the church didn't really look much like Jesus?

Is it the vision of a queer teenager struggling with their identity?

Is it the vision of a gay couple bringing up children to love God, themselves and their neighbors in a world that judges their family?

Is it the vision of the drag queen or the transgender woman who can't imagine a place for themselves in the church as it is now?

Is it the vision of a person in a wheelchair who is often overlooked? Or the vision of Black and Brown people who make white people uncomfortable and even angry as they repeatedly denounce the church's unwillingness to take on racism.

Maybe it's the vision of an ex-convict who learned about Jesus in prison and now wonders what to do with that.

Maybe it's the single mother struggling to keep her children fed, housed, and clothed on a convenience store job and SNAP benefits.

Maybe it's the wealthy CEO or politician who's beginning to wonder what life is really all about.

I suspect there is a piece of the vision in all those people – but we will need to be willing to be surprised, just as Peter was.

We will need to trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in people outside our church community and that the Spirit wants to bring our visions together to bring something new into being.

Like with those early apostles, that will seem sketchy. We'll wonder how to stay anchored if the church doesn't look like it always did. It will feel like the ground is shifting under us...but then it is anyway.

So where do we start? Like it did for Peter and Cornelius, it begins with listening...listening to the lived experience of people very different from you. You probably do know someone who has left the church. If you know them well enough to hear their story without judgment, what

do they have to say? Can you listen without argument? I have to confess I struggle with that, but we need that critique and that vision.

You may not know anybody of another race well enough...you may not know any transgender or gay people at all...you may not even know that many people who aren't like you. If you do, listen.

If you don't, read. Read blogs. Read books written from the perspective of black and brown people and the LGBTQ community.

Sometimes churches have libraries that are often stocked with churchy books...sometimes bad ones. Maybe we need a small collection of books that will help us catch some of those other visions. Watch documentaries on YouTube or television that make you think outside your usual box. Let me know if you want suggestions.

It will be unsettling. It has been for me. Change is hard.

But we will have an anchor. It's the one Jesus left with us...the Holy Spirit. The spirit of the risen Christ who dwells within us. We'll have the model of Jesus who shook the world. We'll have the model of the early church that took unbelievable risks to spread the gospel.

We'll have the promise of new birth arising out of that which we so fear losing.

And we'll have the unchanging faithfulness of a God who, through us, intends to bless all of creation.