

Stories of Transformation - From Closed to Open 5-2-10

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Acts 11:1-18

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

This story of Peter's vision is a key story in understanding how it is that the early church kept the gospel alive and moving into new places, transforming the lives of so many throughout the ages. This story of Peter's vision might help us as we work out some of our modern church conflicts, for it is a biblical story about the power and authority of the biblical story. No other issue was more controversial in the early Christian movement than was the issue of whether or not it was necessary for a person to first become Jewish in order to be part of the movement to follow Jesus. Remember, Jesus, himself, was a Jew. And his first disciples were also Jews. So you had those in the circumcision party who strongly believed, based on scripture, that in order for a person to be accepted within the early Jesus movement, they must first be circumcised and adhere to the dietary laws taken from the code clearly laid out in Leviticus.

Peter had always been a faithful Jew. He knew scripture and had followed the dietary laws in order to maintain purity according to the law. But then something happened. Peter had a vision. In that vision,

God is telling Peter to eat things that are clearly forbidden in Leviticus. So Peter refuses, saying that nothing unclean or profane has ever entered his lips. (Maybe he thought God was testing him.) But a voice from heaven replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And to make sure Peter got the message, this happened three times.

The story in Acts 11 begins as Peter is being confronted by those in the circumcision party, asking why he went to the uncircumcised and ate with them. That was clearly a violation of scripture and their religious tradition. Peter tell them the story of his vision. He also shares his own experience of preaching to the Gentiles and seeing how the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon the Jews - those to whom he was now speaking. And Peter ends by asking the question, "If then God gave them the same gift that was given to us when we believed, who was I that I could hinder God?" "Who was I that I could hinder God?" That is the question that broke open the whole Jesus movement and convicted those who would have made circumcision and

purity codes necessary in order to follow Jesus. This story, part of the biblical story, shows us that it is biblical to be open to new insights and understandings from God, even when they counter other ideas and practices that are in the Bible. This story helps us understand that the Bible is a living, breathing testament to how God works in and through the people of faith as they struggle to understand and be faithful the way of Jesus. Even though there was a scriptural basis for keeping strict purity codes and not eating with certain people, because they were followers of Jesus, who was always getting into trouble because of the company he kept, these early people of faith felt compelled to be open to new insight and practice. Because of the one they followed, they had to be open to being surprised and changed, transformed by the living spirit of God. Jesus had certainly taught them that much. And that allowed the early Christian community to be transformed from being closed to open. Most of us would not be here today if the decision had been to require followers to first become Jews before being part of the community of faith.

One of the stories of I received illustrates the power of transformation from closed to open. It comes from the devotional guide called *The Secret Place*. "One morning I came away from cancer treatment with a heavy heart. I decided to head to a local market where I hoped to find an attractive scarf for my head. I had never worn a turban in my life and didn't know what I was looking for or how to fold one. Behind the counter of the hospital tuck shop stood a Muslim lady wearing an exquisite turban. "How do you fold your scarf to look like that?" I asked. She looked at me with compassion and asked, "Are you going to lose your hair?" My eyes filled with tears as I nodded. Without hesitation, the woman reached up and unraveled her turban. She showed me how to fold it and fix it to my head. As I turned to leave, she placed her hand over mine and said, "I hope everything goes well for you." A Muslim woman is not supposed to uncover her head in public. This woman set aside tradition in order to show compassion and to open herself to the need of another. She was

open to the spirit of God moving in and through this relationship to bring healing and hope.

There are many times in my ministry that I have seen the spirit of God at work to transform people from closed to open; to see how the spirit of God works in ways we don't always understand or even agree with, yet that it is at work seems so clear. In a former congregation I served, one Sunday, at the end of the worship service, a teenager came forward to declare his desire to join the church. Now this is always a joy-filled moment in the life of a church, when someone decides and declares they want to become a member. I don't know what it was exactly that led me to do this, I don't always, and I'm not even sure if I gave it, or if it was taken, but somehow, the microphone ended up in this young man's hand. And he began to speak. He started telling his own story of being shuffled from foster home to foster home - never landing anywhere for very long - never feeling desired or settled. He said that he had wanted to give his life to following Jesus, but it had been impossible due to his turbulent, erratic life, but how

that had changed now that he'd been adopted by a loving, faithful couple, and was part of a family and a church family. Now, finally, he could give his life to Christ. As this young man spoke from the heart, witnessing to the power of love to transform his life, I have to tell you, there was not a dry eye in the sanctuary that day. That story was real and intense and full of the power of God at work. I had the privilege of baptizing that young man, and the congregation had the privilege of nurturing him in the faith and helping his parents provide a stable, loving, Spirit-filled environment in which he could grow and serve God.

I have to tell you about the couple who adopted this teen. They had a big place in their hearts and in their home for troubled and unwanted boys. They had adopted another boy who was born with fetal alcohol syndrome and who had little chance to find a home. They adopted older brothers who could not find a placement because they had too many issues along with tattoos and hair that was in colors real hair just doesn't come. This couple provided foster care for other boys who had been abandoned by their parents, who had been in

trouble with the law, who no one else would take for a variety of reasons. In 1996 this couple had been declared Foster Parents of the Year in the State of Iowa. And all those boys were brought to worship, attended youth group and camp; some of them even became leaders in regional youth settings. Not all their stories are "success" stories, but they no doubt had a chance because of the love they received. And that young man, whose story brought tears to the eyes of a whole congregation, even as an adult, still participates in the life of that congregation, serving God in and through that community of faith who cherished him and was open to his story of transformation, and even how his transformation would cause their own.

You see, there is one thing that I haven't told you about this exemplary couple, who were together, creating a home for so many children in need, for over 20 years before one of them died suddenly of a heart attack. Both people in this couple were men. So when I talk about how the story of this young man caused the transformation of others, that is what I mean. This congregation is in rural Iowa. People

had very differing views on homosexuality. But as this young man told his story, it became clear to all who heard it, that it was the very spirit of God at work through this gay couple that had transformed the lives and given hope and a new chance to so many who had been failed by all the traditional avenues offered. And even though there would still be differing opinions about homosexuality, there was agreement that God works in surprising ways and that we all need to stay open to God at work to bring grace and love and hope. And it was clear that the work of Jesus in seeking out the least, the lost and the last was happening through this couple and we collectively had to ask the question that Peter asked, "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

As followers of Jesus, who was constantly in trouble for his inclusivity, it is a great compliment and witness to be accused of being a church who welcomes anyone and everyone. For we are all sinners and saints; we are all in need of grace and love; and we are all potential vessels of the very spirit of God, alive and at work in the world to bring healing, hope and love. "Who are we that we could hinder God?" Amen.