



October 7, 2007
World Communion

Acts 10:34-43
Your Changing World
M. Craig Barnes

We live in a world that is rapidly changing. Sometimes it feels like all of these changes are at the gates of our lives. But it is just possible that they have been sent to us by God.

+++

It had been a very dramatic time for the disciples. First Jesus was crucified. Then he rose from the dead. Forty days later he ascended into heaven after telling the disciples to go into all the world as his witnesses. "But first," he said, "wait in Jerusalem for the power of the Holy Spirit." So the disciples returned to the upper room. It was that special place where they had special memories with Jesus. Once inside, they closed the gates and devoted themselves to prayer. Ah, they loved the sanctuary of this upper room.

We all understand this love. When the changing world takes your life for a spin and everything you cherish is being tossed around, the longing is great to find a quiet sanctuary. It's a place where you can shut the gates and where you don't have to be defended against the things that wear away at your soul. One of the greatest things about your sanctuary is that it's one of the few places in life that does not change.

One of our favorite sanctuaries is tradition. Since it is so old and routine, it offers us comfort and gives us perspective on our problems. In the words of the Chicago Cubs, who just blew the playoffs again, "Anyone can have a bad century." That's what tradition tells you. But what happens when even the traditions change?

The disciples found their comforting tradition in the gated upper room, and they could have stayed there forever. For precisely that reason the Holy Spirit interrupted them, blew fire into their hearts, and blew wind that pushed them outside of the gates. Peter suddenly began preaching, and 3,000 Jews from different parts of the world who were in Jerusalem heard the sermon, became believers in Jesus Christ, and joined the church. Remarkable! In a moment the church went from 12 to 3,012. And the tradition of retreating to an upper room changed forever.

Just about the time they got all of that under control, elected some officers, figured out how to give and distribute funds, and got the gates repaired, their tradition was interrupted again. Stephen was martyred, and the church scattered from Jerusalem. Philip went to Samaria to hide but found the people there eager to learn about Jesus. So he baptized them. Samaritans! These were half-bred Jews who didn't worship correctly. Nobody was counting on having them in the church. Then, the next thing he knew, Philip was baptizing an Ethiopian Eunuch who was not even close to being in the gates. And after that, word came from Damascus that Saul the Persecutor had been converted and baptized.

The more the Holy Spirit pushed the church to engage the world, the more it grew, and the more it changed. By the time we get to the tenth chapter of Acts, the church is made up of people from different nations speaking different languages, a bunch of Samaritans, a fanatical ex-Pharisee who now wants to be an Apostle, and an Ethiopian. (This was when we invented nametags.)

When we find Peter in our text, he is at a beach house by the Mediterranean Sea, perhaps on a little vacation. He went up onto the flat roof to pray and to be alone with God. There it is again: a place where he can shut the gates on his changing world. While he was praying, he saw a vision of a large sheet descending from heaven. Inside the sheet were all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds. A voice from heaven said, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." Peter said, "I can't do that! I'm a Jew. In our tradition we don't eat things that are unclean." The Lord interrupted Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Peter wasn't a fundamentalist. He was just trying to hang on to his Hebrew traditions that were being threatened by all these new converts who had rushed the gates of the church. His world was being reconfigured by the larger world that would not leave him alone.

We all use religion to create a world that makes sense to us. When the rest of the world appears threatening, even terrorizing, we retreat to our religiously-constructed, smaller world for sanctuary. But God insists on holding the whole world in his hands. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

We are told that while Peter was wondering what this vision meant, he heard someone at the gates of his house. It was the servants of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, who was not only a Gentile but a Roman officer. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them to Cornelius' home. If I were Peter, I would be wondering why I am taking God to my enemy's house. But Peter wasn't taking God to Cornelius. We're told that before Peter arrived, Cornelius was already a devout man who feared God, gave alms liberally, and prayed constantly.

I am often asked if God hears the prayers of the Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists? Yes, of course. God even hears the secret meditations of the atheist. How could God be God and not hear everything?

The question isn't: Can Cornelius find God without the church? The question is: Can the church find what God is doing outside of its gates?

I am not criticizing the importance of having a place of sanctuary. Remember that the disciples were right to wait in the upper room for the Holy Spirit. And Peter was not judged for withdrawing to a quiet place of prayer behind closed gates in his house by the sea. Neither are we judged for entering this beautiful, peaceful place of prayer on Sundays. We all need sanctuary. But like the first disciples, we'll discover that God comes to us in our prayers to claim that he is at work in the very changes of society that we flee when we enter the church's sanctuary.

Not long ago, I had the opportunity to visit one of our church members at his place of employment. He gave me a quick tour of the offices where hundreds of people work everyday. We passed so many cubicles. I saw a couple of men wearing yarmulkes and another with a turban. Someone was cursing at the Xerox repair man. Someone else was gesturing wildly to make a point. A lot of phones were ringing. But mostly, I just saw people staring into computer screens. My first thought was about how foreign this world is to the church gates. My second thought was to remember that Christ was already here among all of these Corneliuses. My third thought was to wonder how does the church prepare people to see Christ in this world, or when we read the newspapers, or when we go to the PTA meetings, or when we greet the new neighbors whose first language is not English? The purpose of our sanctuary is not to hide from this, but to renew our vision of the Christ who is at work in it all.

Someone is at your gates. If you pay attention this week, you will hear their voices telling you about their search for spirituality. They may not even call it that. They may start off by telling you about a disturbing op-ed column, their frustration with the war in Iraq, their divorce, their cynicism about work, or their fears about their children. If you listen carefully, you can hear the subtext of their yearning for God. The yearning is already a prayer. God is at work converting Cornelius' life, and God is converting your world through Cornelius.

Someone is at your gates. Maybe your colleague or your neighbor. Maybe your enemy or someone you were fleeing. Maybe someone you will meet this week. Probably sent by God. Amen.