

## “A Still-Speaking God”

Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

In the story for today from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is the main character. He is the one who encounters the still-speaking God. Peter, like many of us, had grown up in a family where it was understood that God had already spoken everything that needed to be spoken, and that nothing further needed to be said. God had revealed the 10 Commandments, the Law of Moses, the dietary laws, all the instructions for faithful living. Peter had been to Hebrew School and understood he was not to eat a ham sandwich; he was not to work on the Sabbath Day, and he was not to enter the house of a Gentile; that is, anyone not of his religious persuasion. It would not have occurred to Peter that God might have something further to say, something more to reveal, some new light to offer.

We all know someone like Peter. My Grandmother Clemmer comes to mind. Walking into her kitchen was like walking into her great-grandmother's kitchen; I had the feeling that nothing had changed there in centuries. The cookie jar was in the same spot on the same counter; the salt and pepper shakers had not budged in one hundred years; and the meatloaf recipe was exactly as it had been at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The dish towels were in the second drawer on the left side of the sink. You get the idea. If someone were to suggest preparing a quiche or beef stroganoff or crème brule, or cheese fondu, she would have looked at you as if you had just broken one of the original commandments. And if, by chance, she learned you were dating a Catholic girl or a Jewish boy or even a Lutheran, she would give you a scowl that sent shivers up and down your spine.

It would not have occurred to her that God might have a new idea or a new hope or a new way of bringing people together. Now, I loved my grandmother dearly. Don't get me wrong. But, like Peter, she wasn't exactly on the lookout for some new revelation of God's truth.

So, Peter, who knows his Mosaic Law and its dietary limitations, is totally shocked when he has the vision of all the Bible's unclean animals and hears the voice of God saying, "Peter, take and eat." He is shocked to his core. His tongue has never tasted pork or shrimp or rock badger. He has never broken bread with a non-Jewish person. He has never shared a cup of coffee with a Gentile.

To hear God insisting that Peter now consider as "clean" the foods and the people that had previously been identified as "unclean," was inviting the apostle to understand that God is still speaking; that there is more light to be revealed. The whole Gentile world, previously discounted as living outside the realm of God's love, were now to be embraced; not just tolerated, but embraced and accepted and affirmed.

This amazing narrative of Peter and the sheet descending from heaven and the unclean animals and the Gentiles who knock on Peter's door is included in the Bible because it reveals a fundamental truth: Our God is still speaking.

Our work, as a church community, is to discern what it is God is revealing now. What are the new things God is doing?

In the 1970's, South Church discerned God was calling us into a relationship with an inner city church. We entered into a sister church relationship with the Horace Bushnell Church on the corner of Albany and Vine. That was an exciting, life-giving time. The Spirit moved across the Connecticut River in both directions! There are still a few members who remember those days.

In the 1980's, South Church called the Rev. Brenda Pelc-Faszczka to serve as its interim senior minister. She helped this congregation discern that God is revealed in feminine images as well as masculine, with a female presence as well as a male presence. She helped the church see the value of language that includes and doesn't exclude. Many would testify that God had spoken through her in a new way.

In the 1990's, South Church discerned that God also invites gay and lesbian folks to the table; that God was still speaking, still revealing more light. I recall the discussion groups and the friendly visitors and the prayers and the films, and finally the declaration to be an Open and Affirming Church.

In this current decade, the work of discernment continues. Many of us would say that God speaks by nudging us; nudging us to reach out to refugee families fleeing from Syria and Afghanistan and other oppressive regimes. Many of us would say that God is nudging us toward new styles of worship on days other than Sundays. Many of us would say that God is nudging us toward creating a much less violent world, a world where conflicts are resolved justly and peacefully. Many of us would say that God is nudging us to be a green church where recycling is a priority, where energy is conserved, where the earth is regarded as a brother or a sister. Many of us would say that God is nudging us to work cooperatively with other faith traditions to eliminate poverty and injustice.

Tomorrow evening, we'll gather in the social hall to begin meeting our Muslim neighbors and to understand from them what Islam is all about. On most Tuesday mornings, Rabbi Marantz from Congregation Kol Kaverim is the co-leader of our Bible class. Last thanksgiving, we listened in our sanctuary to an elegant sermon on 'Connectivity' by a local Hindu scholar.

Looking around the halls of our church, one discerns God is still speaking, inviting people from different faiths to know each other and to respect each other.

I had my own epiphany on Monday. I stood at mile 17 of the Boston Marathon. It's also known as Heartbreak Hill. I watched men and women in wheel chairs go speeding by. I watched Ethiopian women and Kenyan men run as if they were dancing. I watched runners with prosthetic legs focus on the finishing line. There were runners from China and Japan, from all the European countries, from the Ukraine and from Mexico.

All along Commonwealth Avenue, there were families of every shape and size: some waving banners, some offering quartered oranges on trays, everyone shouting encouragement. The scene was overwhelming to me. I felt I was glimpsing the Kingdom of Heaven. The diversity of race and culture; the diversity of languages, the diversity of running styles, the diversity of ages; I wanted to freeze that moment in time. I didn't want the event to end.

Later, as I headed back to my truck, I realized I had encountered the Still-Speaking God. The Still-Speaking God was there at the Boston Marathon! The word that penetrated my soul is the word 'Diversity.' In the midst of all that diversity, I felt alive and hopeful.

The Apostle Peter heard that same word on the roof of his home as he prayed. I have come to believe that God is the Creator of a mind-boggling diversity within the human family. And, I believe God is inviting us all to get acquainted! The more committed I am to diversity, the more I find myself in the greatest of hope! Amen!

