

Dreaming in Joppa

I would like for you to think for a moment about how often the problem of prejudice is reflected in the world news we get from television and the daily paper. The Muslim Arabs despise the Jews of Israel, and at the moment Mideast peace talks are stalled. In Ireland the other day some Protestants are thought to have burned one of their own churches so that other Protestants, thinking the Catholics had done it, would burn Catholic churches in retaliation. In Algeria last week some religious extremists surprised a small village one morning and slaughtered 93 men, women and children with knives, shovels and hatchets.

We talk a lot in places like this about expanding the kingdom of right relationships, and it does happen here and there, but ancient prejudices still fester at home and around the world, and somebody is forever at work rebuilding the walls that separate people. It reminded me in recent days of a story Luke tells about how the early church hid behind a wall of prejudice until a man had a dream in which he heard the voice of God saying that walls are a bad idea. Christianity, by the way, grew up much the way we do — by fits and starts. It began among Jewish people but it quickly became obvious that, given the spirit of Christ, it was meant to include a larger world of Gentiles, like the Greeks and the Romans.

Some of those early Jewish Christians were willing to welcome Gentiles into the church if they would promise to obey certain Jewish customs and food laws. Others, like the Apostle Paul, were more liberal. So far as we know this was the first great controversy in the Christian church and I'm sure it was on the Apostle

Peter's mind one day when he took lodgings for a while in a busy seaport called Joppa. (It still exists, by the way, as a suburb of Tel Aviv called Jaffa (ya-fa) by the locals). Peter is staying in the house of a man who tans animal hides for a living, so that all around are the sights and smells of skins drying in the sun — reminders of Jewish food laws and what a good Jew was forbidden to eat. Peter is preaching a new religion now, but he is Jewish by birth and upbringing, and he and other new Christians are still concerned about kosher food and about the larger question of whether God intended to include Gentiles, “non-kosher” people, in this new faith.

The story of what happened to the Apostle Peter while he was in the house of Simon the tanner is probably more of a literary construct, a dramatization, than a factual account — it's full of visions and sacred numbers and strange coincidences — but it spoke a truth to the early church, a truth as relevant this morning as it was nearly 2000 years ago. The story goes like this:

One day at the hour of noonday prayer, Peter went up on the roof to send some thoughts toward God. It had been quite a long time since breakfast and it must have been hard to concentrate with kitchen smells drifting up to remind him that he was hungry. We get few details in most Bible stories, and this one is no exception, but my guess is that when Peter heard his stomach growl, and smelled food being cooked in a house that was hardly a suitable lodging for a scrupulous Jew, he began to think about his curious situation. He is about to go downstairs and eat, in what is not exactly a kosher place: all those hides and a host at the table whose hands are

permanently stained with tanning acid — how could he help but think about the separateness of his people, their obsession with what is clean and unclean, and how it all fit in with the new Christian faith he had accepted.

The cook is slow, and so as Peter says his prayers, and thinks about food and purity laws, he drifts off to sleep and has a dream: coming down out of a crack in the sky, wrapped in a huge sheet, is a big bundle of living creatures — some that walked on four legs, some that flew, some that crawled: a crazy mix, by Jewish food laws, of clean and unclean flesh by Jewish food laws. So.... a hungry man goes to sleep and dreams of something that can be eaten: the psychological connection is easy enough. And the flesh in the dream is not all kosher, which is not surprising either, given that Peter may have been wondering before he fell asleep whether what's for lunch is going to be kosher in the home of a tanner. It all comes together in the dream: a man whose stomach has been growling hears the voice of the Godand the voice says, *It is all right to eat the food you see in this sheet.*

But Peter has felt superior all his life to people who eat prohibited food, so with a touch of disgust and more than a touch of pride he says, “By no means, Lord, for not once in all my life have I ever eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” And then the voice in the dream knocks the props out from under centuries of strict food laws by saying, “It is not for you to call unclean what God considers clean.” In the manner of biblical literature, this dream dialogue happens three times because that is the number of completeness. Three times the voice invites Peter to partake from the bizarre cornucopia; three times the old habits linger: “No thanks, Lord,

you know I can't eat that kind of meat." And three times, in this dramatization of a new freedom from food laws in a new religion, the message is that God is not obsessed with diet. The dream ends, Peter wakes up, and while he is still scratching his head about exactly what it all means, Lo and behold some non-kosher Gentile strangers are down below at the gate yelling to know whether this is the place where a man named Simon Peter is lodging.

We need a flashback now to understand what's happening. As Luke arranges this story, another man has had a dream of his own a day or so earlier — this one at a Roman army post up in Caesarea, about 35 miles to the north. This dreamer is a Gentile, one of those unsanctified people from whom Peter has been taught to keep his distance, but in his dream this man is told to invite Peter, the Jew-turned-Christian, to come up to his house and preach a sermon. So Captain Cornelius sends one of his soldiers and a couple of servants to fetch the Apostle. As you would expect in Luke's artistry, they arrive at exactly the right moment, and as you might also expect there are three of them knocking at the gate and ready to escort Peter up to Caesarea. Coincidental dreaming, perfect timing, sets of sacred threes — is this literal history or sacred art? For me it bears the signs of art — Luke's dramatic way of telling the church how what began as a Jewish sect dropped its opposition to welcoming Gentiles.

Peter has had a sudden lesson about artificial distinctions in God's world, so he invites these unclean Gentiles to be his guests that night, and they leave in the morning for Caesarea. Meanwhile, up in that city,

Captain Cornelius has gathered a crowd of curious friends and relatives, and when the entourage from Joppa arrives he says to Peter, “Preach to us.” It’s a bizarre group brought together in this highly symbolic story: Gentiles, foreigners, Jews — a bunch of people together who don’t belong together, like a few Klan members sharing a Saturday evening picnic with some of the good folk on Piatt street, or Fred Phelps and family inviting the Gay and Lesbian Alliance to a backyard barbecue.

It’s the strangest audience the Apostle has ever even imagined facing, but it’s an audience, and he’s a preacher, so he starts talking.....and his opening words shatter centuries of social custom and religious doctrine. If we really believed them, they would ring all the way into the twentieth century to blow away every neo-Nazi and hate-monger and ditto-head, every racist and woman-hating male chauvinist and homophobic make-believe Christian on the face of the whole earth. Because what the words say is that God shows no partiality toward race or gender but accepts good people of every kind, from everywhere. No wonder the early church called the spirit of Jesus a “mighty wind”! Tornado is more like it — flattening houses of prejudice and hate, while up from the splintered remains crawl people who didn’t speak before but are now singing and embracing one another.

Luke has written a story about God breaking down the barriers — and whether he wrote it as literal history or used considerable poetic license, the point is the same: something there is that doesn’t love a wall! Sadly, although Peter got the message this time, it was hard to break permanently with the habits of a lifetime,

and he fell from grace sometime later. We know because there is another dramatic story in the New Testament [Galatians 2] about a time when Peter and Paul show up to visit a church in Antioch — both of them at the same time. Talk about a church with a buzz on: “Think of it,” they must have said, “two apostle at the same time, Peter *and* Paul, coming to our little church!” So somebody organizes a dinner — the Women’s Guild, if they are lucky! — “A through G bring vegetables, H through M bring meat, the rest of you bring dessert.”

They gather in Fellowship Hall, with the tables all decorated, but then they get nervous. You see, this church at Antioch was integrated, which in those days meant Jews and Gentiles meeting together. So one says to another, *You know, not all this potluck food is kosher — Do you suppose that both our famous guests will eat what we’ve brought?* On the table are platters of food without regard to Jewish dietary laws, clean and unclean side by side — polish pickles, half a ham — what’s going to happen? The word is out that Paul has loosened up a lot about food laws, and sure enough he goes up to the buffet table and there’s no problem at all: he grabs a little bit of everything. He’s the free man in Christ who said, “Among the Jews I can live as a Jew, among the Gentiles I can live as a Gentile.” But then comes the more conservative apostle, Simon Peter from Jerusalem, and for a moment there is hushed silence. But he scoops up a pork chop — still hearing that voice in the vision — and the whole place breaks out in song: “We are one in the spirit, we are one in the Lord!” And when he sits down at a table with several Gentiles, the hall is really rockin’.

Some things are just too good to last without a temporary setback. This amazing new brotherhood goes on long enough for some of the right-wing Jewish leaders from Jerusalem to show up — and for fear of what they will think of his eating non-kosher food, our fisherman friend who had betrayed Christ one terrible night now betrays Him again. He picks up his plate, moves away from the “unclean” Gentiles, and sits at a table with kosher food and Jews only. The dream has faded, the voice is lost that had said, “What God has made clean, do not call common or unclean,” and suddenly this ancient story becomes our own world in miniature.

We huddle with our own kind, we have a “kosher” life as surely as any first-century Jew ever thought of having. We are so careful about who is included in our love and friendship that all sorts of good people get left out. We need to stretch out at high noon as Peter once did, in the home of someone not like us, and slip into a dream — a dream in which God mixes everything up together in a great sheet to remind us again that our prejudices and separations are not His — a dream so unsettling to our lifelong habits that we are tempted to say, “Take it away! I’m not ready to live outside my own pleasant cocoon.” But of course, when you drop a sheet full of the world-as-it-is upon a table, the corners fall to the ground, and the sheet becomes a tablecloth....and if you grab a couple of candlesticks and pull up a few extra chairs, you have a banquet fit for the kingdom.

Surely we understand how Peter must have felt. He’s had a dream that it would be OK to eat with Gentiles, and so he did it, and it didn’t seem bad at all — seemed the right thing to do, in fact — but habits are hard to break [you know about that, don’t you?], and when the guys from back home show up the great man

falls from grace. Only a few days before, something down in the redeemed part of his soul has sounded like God, saying, “No more clean and unclean, no more “us” and “them,” no more of this “our kind” and “their kind.” But in a moment of weakness or fear, he forget....just as, over and over, we forget: and so Arab and Jew stagger stubbornly on through their blood-soaked history, Irish Protestant fights Irish Catholic, African Hutu fights African Tutsi, blacks and whites mistrust each other, homophobic people go off to hunt their own table in a far corner of the dining room — all the walls of fear and hatred some of us find it so hard to tear down.

It would be several years after Peter’s dream before someone else wrote these words which became part of our sacred scripture: *Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their fellow human-beings are simply kidding themselves!* Far too often we pay no attention to that blunt statement, but once in a while there is an unforgettable moment to restore our faith in the power of love. Here is the true story of such a moment.

Most of you know the history of black political activist Nelson Mandela, locked up in prison for 27 years by the white establishment of South Africa because he opposed their policy of racial segregation. Worldwide pressure finally won Mandela’s release, and 3 years ago this spring, when South Africa held its first democratic elections, he was elected president. A year later his country prepared to host the Rugby World Cup tournament. Rugby has been a white man’s game, so the South African team, like most others, is entirely white. But South Africa is about 80% black, so even though the world championship was being played right there in Johannesburg, blacks had little interest in supporting their country’s team. In fact, just before the games

started, a hot debate erupted about the South African team symbol, which was that leaping gazelle called a “springbok.” The white Afrikaners argued that the springbok had been the symbol of every rugby team they had ever had, while blacks said, “That’s right! And it reminds us of South Africa’s racist history. We want it changed!” It was the North High Redskin quarrel magnified a thousand times, and it was dangerous.

Nelson Mandela knows something of the saving power of grace, so a few days before the opening game he visited the all-white South African team and then called a press conference. He showed up in a rugby jersey and an athletic cap with the team mascot on it, a springbok. He admitted that until the free elections, he and most other blacks in South Africa had supported whatever team played against the Springboks. “But regardless of the past,” he said, “these are our boys now. They may be all white, but they’re our team, and we must get behind them and support them in this tournament.”

On the following day, the Springbok’s coach sent word for his players not to show up in their practice gear — to wear suits and ties instead. He took them to the prison where Nelson Mandela had grown old behind bars. As the coach and his players stood in the tiny cell, the coach said: “President Mandela was kept here for 27 years by the racist policies of our government. We Afrikaners tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, and yet he has now backed us publicly. We can’t let him down.” The Springboks were not expected to do very well, but they played over their heads and made it into the finals against New Zealand, a perennial power in

rugby. It was a little like Friends playing Nebraska in football, but to everyone's surprise the game was tied at the end of regulation.

During the timeout President Mandela, who was in the stadium wearing his Springbok jersey, brought a children's choir out of the stands. They sang an old African miners' song, which to them is sort of what *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* was to the slaves in our country. Within minutes, 65,000 people — white and black — were standing in the stadium and singing a black African miners' song. Andrew Young, once our ambassador to the United Nations and later Mayor of Atlanta, was there that day, watching. He said, "I don't know anything about rugby, and I didn't understand the words of that song, but I was in tears." When the overtime began, the Springboks were unstoppable and won the World Rugby Championship. For the next 24 hours one of the most divided nations on the planet was united as whites and blacks danced together in the streets.

I know....such moments pass and people fall back into their old separations, just as Simon Peter did in our story from the Bible, but we live on hope — and that day in South Africa left a memory to rekindle our hope that someday we will find a way to live in peace and in mutual respect for one another. May it be so.

From our dreams, Eternal God, wake us over and over to Christ's dream of

a kingdom of right relationships that embraces all of us. Amen.