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Dreams That Launch the Gospel

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Acts 11:1-18

[Peter's Report to the Church at Jerusalem]

¹ 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."

Just as Jesus promised him it would, the gospel led Peter where he did not want to go. The top of the list of places Peter did not want to go was the home of a Roman military officer to eat supper. Peter wanted to go there like a rabbit wants to have supper with a fox, like a frog wants to have supper with a snake, like a fly wants to have supper with a spider.

And that's just the political. Religion was bigger still. Faithful Jews simply did not eat with non-Jews, also called “the uncircumcised” and “Gentiles” – words that Gentiles never used about themselves, of course. Eating gentile food with Gentiles? It was indecent. Jews could speak with Gentiles. They could hire Gentiles. They could transact business with them. But to eat what they ate, at the same table with them, was revolting.

It was also forbidden biblically. And isn't it convenient when the same things that gross us out are also biblically forbidden? Don't you love that feeling? Doesn't it just make you feel *extra* Christian? Which is why God had to trick Peter into going to Joppa. Peter thought it was to raise the widow Tabitha from the dead, which he was very excited to do. When really, the point was to get him on the roof of Simon the Tanner's house for this vision of the nasty animal barbecue, which Peter would never in a million years have agreed to, outright.

Thus, the dreams. The complementary dreams of Peter and Cornelius. Dreams that launch the gospel through the political, social, and religious wall between the church and the rest of the world. It had to be Peter. Because he could never have been on the receiving end of the story he had to tell the church. And it had to be a Roman military officer, so that every Gentile after that would seem easy! Luke says Cornelius was charitable and prayerful – which only served to make him the best of the worst, but the worst nevertheless.

Will Willimon called this passage “the full blast of the gospel” – the point at which the apostles realize there are no limits to the risk, to the danger, and to the adventure of Christian discipleship, for themselves and for the church.

Peter told the story for which he had no proof-text, not a single scriptural tradition to back it. What he had was a dream. He also had a brain for remembering and for thinking and for study. And a heart for feeling. And he had the Holy Spirit – with him and helping him figure out what it all meant. As he said it in his speech to his critics,

“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?”

See, Peter already knew Jesus was Lord of All. But he didn't know all that meant. He certainly never imagined it meant Roman military officers. But then again, “ruler of heaven and earth” would naturally include Gentiles if you thought about it. It actually makes a lot of sense, once you think about it. Peter just never did. He never thought to think about it.

He had no reason to think about it. He didn't know any Roman military officers personally. Their paths never crossed for any good reason. So, given that he was

never, ever of his own free will going to go to supper with the likes of Cornelius, a God-given dream probably was the only way Peter was ever going to think about it.

God had to get them into each other's path. Thus, the dreams. I have this idea of Peter getting through this day: how exhausted he must have been from the prep and anticipation of this meeting, how relieved he was about how well it went. And the unsaid assumption settling in his mind, that this issue was finally resolved, this issue of who was included in the gospel, now that the church finally – once and for all time – understood the meaning of “Jesus is Lord of All.”

Except it wasn't – settled in either Peter's mind or in the church. He'll fail at Antioch, choose not to eat with Gentiles for fear of what his Jewish brothers will think of him. Paul calls him out that time. And the church? WE are forever on that adventure Will Willimon calls “penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and implications of the gospel which cannot be explained in any other way than our Lord has shown us as something we could never have seen on our own even if we were looking at scripture.”¹

I was a divinity student at the most liberal of the Southern Baptist seminaries: the first to admit women as *students* – around 1908, I think, before the Ivies– then as *theology students*, though in the beginning women did not take Greek and Hebrew for fear it would tax their brains too heavily. I confess it taxed my brain heavily. I was there in the 1980's and 90's when and where women students confessed our calling to pastoral ministry only to each other and always in whispers, behind locked doors.

The bravest among us would never, ever have said out loud in class or chapel or a study group that our calling had come to us in a dream, for fear of being laughed out of the room by people claiming to know the Scriptures – all but this one, apparently. But the complementary dreams of a few professors, most of them men, confirmed our own, helping us translate those dreams as Cornelius and Peter translated theirs.

The same dream, two millennia apart. We were already Christian, as was Cornelius, assuming Jesus is Lord of All. Just waiting for our place at the one table – waiting for the others to scooch over – the same way God told Peter to scooch over.

It's the easiest thing to miss in the book of Acts, that when new people come to Christ or new Christians come into the church, they are NOT the only ones God expects to change. The church also changes. The church, like Peter and the ones who were originally his critics, is also converted – in personality, in style, in culture, in ministry, in politics. Our life together changes to reflect just that: our lives, *together*.

And it's never finished, any more than a family is ever finished. We thought our family was finished after two kids. We wouldn't even be OUR FAMILY without Emy.

¹ Willimon, p. 98

She made us OUR FAMILY. Or any more than a country is ever finished. Would our country be OUR COUNTRY without the mix of people we are?

The church is family, constantly adopting. Christendom is a kingdom, always welcoming new immigrants – and being changed by them. You think the gospel meant what Peter and his cronies thought it meant before Joppa? I think it did. But that wasn't ALL the gospel meant – not for all people, for all time. Not even what it meant for all people in that time. Not even all it meant for Peter himself.

The gospel was deeper and wider when he went to bed that night than it had been when he had gotten up that morning. And the thing I realize is: I don't always treat the gospel as if it can do that, as if it can fall apart and re-configure itself in a day without my help, without obvious biblical precedent.

There are times in the life of the church in which we are going to have to use our brains to remember, to think, and to study. Times we will have to use our hearts to feel our way through what cannot be thought through. And times in which we are going to have to pray, when we are going to have to lean heavily on the Holy Spirit who is sometimes known to lead people to places they do not want to go, into places and projects for which there is NO scriptural tradition, no proof-text, no precedent.

As for me, and me only, I have chosen to err on the side of grace. Knowing there is every chance that I am wrong, that I may get it – the theology – wrong. And so I intentionally, knowingly choose to take whatever punishment comes with having been too big-hearted, too kind, too welcoming, too graceful, too inclusive. There's nothing sacrificial about it. Because erring on the side of grace is easier and way more fun.

Could be I'm just lazy. ... Nah, I'm not lazy. Not about this. I've been thinking about this for thirty years. I was thinking about this before I knew I was thinking about this. Either Jesus is Lord of All – or he isn't. And the limitedness of our experience, the smallness of our hearts or minds, those are clearly no obstacle for God, because the Bible says, *Ours is the kind of God who will sneak the truth into our dreams, if there's no other way.*

Would you pray with me?