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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y18
Evensong #25 (5 Easter Year C)
Thursday 3 May 2018

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
John 13:31-35

The First Gentile Christian

"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord." (Acts. 11).

What does it take for a Bible passage to really come alive for us? So much of what we hear every day fails to really penetrate our hearts. Often it is even more difficult to imagine someone like Peter or Cornelius as a real person caught up in the tragedy of real life.

This morning I received a voicemail message from a very old friend named Janet. We first met in church and I've known her for maybe thirty years. We studied the Bible together and shared our lives. In fact, for a while, I was even the executor of Janet's estate. Her voice was so full of pain. She felt embarrassed that people are laughing about the Episcopal Church because of last week's Beyoncé service. She said, "How could you do this in that beautiful Cathedral?"

The writer Rebecca Solnit points out that we use the word "lost" in two disparate ways. On the one hand we all have the experience of losing our keys, a homework assignment, a book or an article of clothing. When this happens we still know where we are. Everything is familiar except that one element.

But then there is the experience of losing oneself. You may have been lost in the woods or a strange city. Solnit describes this as the moment when the world becomes larger than our knowledge of it.¹ In both the ways that we use the word "lost" the striking feeling involves a loss of control.

This was how Janet sounded in her message. It is the way that "the circumcised believers criticized" Peter when they said, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them" (Acts 11)? Religious rules of the time did not permit faithful Jewish men to share meals with outsiders. I can imagine Peter's discomfort in this confrontation.

Change is difficult for all of us, for Janet and me, for Peter and his friends. Peter offers two responses one from a dream in which he met God and the other from his personal experience.

Peter was praying when he had a vision of a large sheet being lowered from heaven with different kinds of animals on it. A voice told him to eat and he refused because according to his faith these animals were unclean. God told him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

The Spirit then told Peter to go with some non-Jewish people who appeared and "not to make a distinction between them and us." When he arrived at their house he began to speak. He describes it to his angry friends, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us in the beginning." Finally to his questioners Peter says, "If then God gave them the same spirit that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

At Grace Cathedral these days we too have a dream. It comes from a deep desire to reach out into the world, to allow God to draw us into new relationships with others. In the same spirit as Peter, we want to meet new people and to hear what God is saying to them. Although this may at times leave us feeling lost, we do not always have to be the ones in control. God is in charge. God will always draw us into a world that is larger than our knowledge of it.

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (NY: Penguin, 2005) 22-3.