When We Wake

A Meditation on Acts 11: 1 – 18

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church May 19, 2019

You know the feeling when your mind is making the transition from sleeping to consciousness, when the body is stirring but you are trying to hold on to the image of the dream. Dreams can be so powerful that they can startle us into wakefulness. They can be so frightening that we scramble away from them, rushing to get that first cup of coffee, hoping to drive away the chill bumps. But dreams can also be so comforting that all we want to do is keep our eyes closed, pull the covers over our heads and try to invite the dream images to return. We want to stay there, wherever “there” might be. Whether oddly uncomfortable, horrifying or beautifully comforting, we are wise to listen to our dreams. When we are wrestling with a particularly critical life question, dreams can urge us towards resolve. Dreams in the night can open pathways in the morning. And dreams in the daytime like Peter’s? Watch out!

It’s kind of funny how everything seems to happen in “threes” for Peter. Three times he denies knowing Jesus or being one of his followers. Three times Jesus asks him to affirm his love. Peter is restored through a tripartite litany of confession and forgiveness. “Do you love me, Peter?” “Lord, you know that I love you.” “Then feed my sheep.” (Twice more!)

It always comes back around to feeding

because the world is always at constant risk of starvation.

Bodies can starve.

Some have no food, and are at risk of not making it until tomorrow.

Some have food, but the “food” is junk, and their bodies are longing for nutrients.

Minds can starve.

For solutions to seemingly logical questions.

For access to knowledge.

For understanding of difference.

Souls can starve.

Some are starving for companionship.

Some for forgiveness.

Others for honesty.

What are some other ways that we hunger? How are we starving? (Responses receivd from the congregation: hope, mercy, forgiveness, help, companionship, love…)

Jesus saw the world’s hunger and offered the food of God’s compassion at tables of every sort. Yet, how does Jesus continually bring trouble down upon his head?

By sharing a table with people with whom he *shouldn’t* eat.

Or by going beyond allowing his hungry disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath and giving them his blessing to do so.

He breaks Sabbath rules in order that the world might be fed in body and soul.

And he tells stories of parties, because it is not enough to just go out and feed people. What Jesus wants us to do is *sit down* beside someone at the table. Not the person who makes us feel comfortable and safe, but the person who makes us uncomfortable, or even a little fearful. In one of these stories he describes an overflowing banquet table surrounded by empty chairs, the guests too busy to attend. The host has to go out and find new guests, guests of all kinds. All the “others” who have been looked over, discounted, rejected, told they were not good enough. Jesus tells the story of God’s magnificent, terrifying, banquet dream.

And then God sends Peter a dream of his own, a dream which in best dream fashion, is truly bizarre: a sheet filled with “unclean” animals and God telling Peter to eat them. Peter wakes from the dream and feels a little shaky. He feels ever so slightly curious. God just told him he can eat *barbecue*…and not Texas barbecue, God forbid, (he’s had that!) but real southern pork barbecue. God has told Peter that he can have shrimp. “Shrimp-kabobs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo. Pan fried, deep fried, stir-fried. There’s pineapple shrimp, lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich.” *(Forest Gump, Paramount Pictures, 1994)* God has just told him to throw out the rule book on how to keep kosher. God has told him to discount one of the markers of Jewish identity. This is serious stuff. “Who me??” says Peter. “I can’t do that!” But God says, “Yes, you can. I just gave you permission!”

Peter is too sleepy to understand whether he should fire up the barbecue or make some sushi, so God makes it easy for him. God, being God, connects the dots for Peter. Peter is more of a man of action than a contemplative, so God gets Peter up and moving. He brings a messenger to his door with very clear instructions. Peter’s “yes” to the invitation to go to Cornelius’ house will change everything. Everything.

I imagine it to be one of the happiest days of Peter’s life. Cornelius, we learn in chapter 10, is a gentile, curious about God, and inspired to care for his community, to show love for his neighbor. Peter, understanding that he is called to bring God’s “message of peace” to all people who seek after God, celebrates this new friendship. He tells Cornelius the story of Jesus’ life and invites his entire household to be baptized. What an amazing pool party that must have been!

The funny thing is that when the Jewish followers of Jesus find out about what happened that day, they do not question Peter for offering renewal through baptism. Their complaint is that Peter *ate* with gentiles. This is after Jesus had been criticized over and over again for the kinds of people he invited to the table. They knew *Jesus* got in trouble for breaking rules in the name of love, but Peter *isn’t* Jesus. How Peter responds is a teaching moment for all of us. He doesn’t get defensive; he doesn’t storm off in anger. He doesn’t try to humiliate or belittle. (I think I’ve tried all of those!) He takes them through the story “step by step.” (Acts 11: 4) With patience and sensitivity, he shares his personal experience, and the community is able to understand.

We look back at those followers of Jesus and wonder how dense they can be, but we are gifted with perfect hindsight. We didn’t learn all we should have learned. The church has been in that exact same place so many times: racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, ableism. We have a long way to go with our understandings of neurodiversity, and how better understandings might influence how we are church. How many times has the church been called to revisit “the rules”? How many times has God sent us a dream like Peter’s? Thank God there have been people like Peter who are willing to walk us through their experiences step-by-step. Sometimes we haven’t listened, and the consequences have been irreversible and heartbreaking.

We need to hold this question in front of us always: is there anyone with whom I could not break bread? Close your eyes. See the linen sheet lowered before you. Who is in that sheet? Who is that person you have named unclean? (The individual on welfare? The woman who had an abortion? The doctor who performed the abortion? The undocumented immigrant? The criminal? The homeless?) What group of people have you named unclean? Who do you see there? I see white supremists, certain political leaders, but I also see that person who hurt me all those years ago. And while it is incomprehensible to me that God would want any of them to come to the table, it is completely comprehensible to God. God’s own son offered bread and wine to the one who would betray him. God’s own son asks us to do the same. We may never have to encounter them across a table, but how we feel about them, how we are able to pray for and about them matters. It matters.

When God breaks rules, you can believe there is a solid reason for doing so. Out of love, God gave the Jewish people dietary laws to help keep them safe and healthy. God gave them dietary laws to help them understand who God is and what true worship can be. But the day came when those laws were too restrictive and were preventing God’s people from being able to embrace the diversity of God’s family.

So God lifted the rules and things have been fuzzy ever since.

It’s so much easier when it’s black and white.

Insider and outsider.

But easy was never God’s way.

Complicated, messy, challenging and restless. That’s God’s way.

May God’s Spirit continue to send us unsettling dreams, just as God sent to Peter.

May those dreams stir us to open our doors so wide that the hinges break off.

With the hinges broken and the doors taken down,

we won’t be able to keep anyone out!

How dangerous! How dangerous and Godly! Amen?