



These were the ones entrusted with the truth of the gospel,  
with maintaining what we now call the 'Apostolic Faith.'  
And they are shocked by what they have heard has happened.  
*Why Peter? Why this?*  
*Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'*

It was the most incendiary issue imaginable.  
We tend to dismiss it as a quaint argument  
perhaps because most of us are Gentiles ourselves.  
It is not controversial to us that we are in the church  
without having first to repent of our 'Gentileness' -  
our diet, our manner of dress, our style of hair,  
our lifestyle if you will.  
But this was a *huge issue* for the Early Church  
especially within the context of the Roman Empire.  
To lower the bar to include Gentiles meant for many  
that the church was moving down the slippery slope  
of accommodation with the world.  
The fear was that the church would lose its distinctiveness of being,  
in the words of the 1st Letter of Peter, '*a chosen race,*  
*royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,*  
*in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts*  
*of him who called you*  
*out of darkness into his marvelous light.'* □ Peter 2:9

As one scholar says,  
The dietary laws [which Gentiles did not honor]  
demarcated faithlessness in the midst of incredible pressure  
to forsake the faith, drop one's particularities  
and become a good citizen of the Empire.  
*A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there,*  
*and it will not be long*  
*before the faith community will be politely obliterated.'*  
Willimon, Wm. Acts: Interpretation Commentary, Atlanta:  
John Knox Press, 1988, p, 96.

The stakes were very high for the church on this matter.  
Scripture seemed clear as well.  
And yet, *look what Peter had done?*  
*Why this of all things?*

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In light of the earnest questions of his closest colleagues  
Peter bore straightforward testimony about what had happened to him.  
He told how he had been changed on this issue,  
How he had become *convinced it was God* who was leading the church  
Into this unimaginable place of welcoming Gentiles into full fellowship.  
And what we have before us in our text this day is Peter's testimony:  
Testimony that while at the tanner's house he saw a vision,  
A vision of all manner of animals, unclean animals;  
Testimony of hearing a voice say, 'Get up, kill and eat';  
Testimony that he resisted this voice and, by no means, would he eat;  
Testimony that the voice then declared  
What God has made clean you must not call profane!  
Testimony that at that moment Gentiles from Caesarea came for him;  
Testimony that the Spirit told him to go with them;  
Testimony that when he got to Caesarea, to the house of Cornelius,  
Not only a Gentile but a Roman Centurion to boot,  
Cornelius shared with him the vision and voice he had received  
Saying, 'Go bring Simon known as Peter,  
He will share a message with you and your house  
By which you will be saved - have life!'  
Testimony that while he spoke to Cornelius and his household  
He sensed the Spirit coming upon them;  
Testimony that he remembered the word of the Lord  
That 'you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit;  
And finally testimony that when he realized these Gentiles had received  
God's Spirit just as he and the other apostles had received it  
When they believed/trusted the Lord Jesus the Christ,  
How could he 'hinder God'  
And not receive these Gentiles into fellowship?  
Peter did not argue points of theology.  
Peter did not attack his colleagues who were critical of him.  
Peter did not go on a campaign to convince his colleagues  
To change their minds.  
He only bore testimony - told the truth of his life  
And his experience of seeking to be faithful to God.  
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Peter's testimony to those so earnestly concerned about the integrity of the faith  
Holds hope for us, sisters and brother.  
And it moves me this morning to do something I do only with fear and  
trembling.

And that is *to bear personal testimony to you,*  
to you who, with me, are in a church, a worldwide church,  
that again is facing a most incendiary issue.  
You know the issue.  
The Episcopalians are in turmoil over it.  
The Lutherans will wrestle with it this summer in their General Synod.  
The Methodists are this week engulfed in it at their General Convention.  
The Catholics and the Baptists are also in turmoil over it  
though, due to their politics, they express that turmoil differently.  
And we Presbyterians are in turmoil over it.  
It was the issue in the background of the contentious  
meeting of Presbytery that occurred in this room in January.  
It will come to a head again two years from now  
at our General Assembly meeting in Birmingham.  
It is an issue *I never wanted to grapple with.*  
It is an issue I never wanted to talk with you about.  
It frankly is an issue that I didn't want to address today.  
But when this text appeared in the lectionary as the text for this day,  
I felt I could not maintain my integrity  
as a preacher of the Word of God and dodge it.

You know the issue:

*shall persons who are gay and lesbian be welcomed  
to full fellowship and participation in the church  
without first having to turn away from and deny  
the way they have come to see that they have been made  
in terms of sexual orientation?*

You also know where I am on this issue.

For my votes at presbytery have been public.

I have talked about the issue in forums here.

I have come to be one who believes we are called by God

to fully welcome gay and lesbian persons in the same way

and with the same expectations for faithful living

that we welcome heterosexual persons.

But what I realize, particularly as I have been confronted again with this text,

that *I have never borne testimony to you* about how I got to this place.

'Why this?' you have every right to ask me as your pastor.

So let me briefly tell you my story.

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I began my ministry with absolutely no question

With my mind or heart about this issue.

Welcoming gay and lesbian persons without their *first* giving up  
the practice of their sexual orientation was *beyond the bounds of the faith*.

Scripture was clear it seemed to me.

And frankly, I thought little more about it.

My first *shock* came in 1979.

The theologian and biblical interpreter I best know, my wife Margaret,  
went as a commissioner to the General Assembly that year.

There, at the first Assembly before which this issue arose

in the old Southern Presbyterian Church,

Margaret voted to change our church's standards on this issue.

The vote failed. But I was stunned at Margaret's stance.

'Why?' I asked Margaret.

And she, like Peter did to his colleagues in Jerusalem, told me her journey.

Toward the end of seminary, she had been on a denominational committee

examining emerging forms of families.

And in that work she had come to encounter gay and lesbian persons,

devout ones, not promiscuous ones.

These were persons truly wrestling with the way

they had come to realize God had made them

and how to live their lives with integrity and in obedience to God.

Furthermore, Margaret discovered a *close friend*,

a person nurtured in and devoted to the church,

one called to ministry just like Margaret, and like Margaret,

one who had pursued that call by going to seminary,

was lesbian and in a committed relationship.

Margaret visited with this friend and listened to her story.

And Margaret, pondering all of this in light of the ministry of Jesus,

came to the conclusion that the welcoming of these persons

was the calling of God to the church.

I honored Margaret.

I could not dismiss her testimony,

for I knew her to be one who was devout and grounded in the faith.

But *I could not go there with her*.

My view of scripture would not allow it.

And for years *she and I disagreed on this matter*.

But then *something happened to me*.

In the late 1980's I heard a sermon by Dr. Fred Craddock.

It was a sermon, in part on this section of the Book of Acts,

+++++This whole controversy about the struggle  
+++++th the Early Church over Gentiles.  
+++And that sermon forced me to go back and do more work on scripture.  
I began to see how in God's movement to open the church to Gentiles  
+++the early Christians had to go back and read scripture again -  
+++++to discover texts long ignored,  
+++++to interpret texts that seemed to restrict the boundaries of the church  
+++++th light of other texts, and especially in light of Jesus.  
And *I began to become less sure*  
+++of my previously firm understanding of scripture on this matter.  
Then, with all of this going on,  
+++ended up getting to know  
+++++absolutely devoted and devout Christians who were gay.  
+++They were also as monogamous as was I.  
+++++They took seriously faithfulness in relationships.  
+++They sought to respond to the calling of God in ways that astounded me  
+++++especially in the face of the barriers they experienced  
+++++within the church.  
+++++They loved Christ's Church even though to do so was hurtful to them.  
I ended up out of all of this where Peter ended up,  
+++saying to myself, *'If then God gave them the same gift he gave us . . .*  
+++++who was I that I could hinder God?'

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So when you have rightly asked,  
+++*'Why is our pastor where he is on this incendiary issue?'* -  
+++++this is my testimony to you.  
+++But I want to *say a few more things* about this testimony.  
First, it is *my* testimony.  
+++don't expect it to be yours.  
+++++For ten years I lived with a person  
+++++with whom I vehemently disagreed on this matter.  
+++I want you to know  
+++++you do not have any obligation to agree with me on this.  
+++Many devout, theologically grounded Christians disagree with me.  
+++++That is okay.  
+++I only offer my testimony  
+++++th the face of your explicit and implicit question of *'why?'*  
Second, I lay my testimony before the church.  
+++That is all Peter did.  
+++++He shared.

The apostles - ultimately over in chapter 15 of Acts -  
finally made a decision about this whole matter.  
And it was somewhat of a compromise decision.  
Yet Peter and the others submitted to that decision.  
I will abide by the Constitution of the Church.  
I will, through constitutional means,  
but of my understanding of faithful response to God,  
endeavor to change that Constitution.  
But I will not in my ministry here as your pastor ever defy that Constitution.  
Third, I know that in sharing so openly with you  
from the vantage point of this pulpit,

You are left with limited ways to engage me and challenge me.  
So I will make myself available this afternoon,  
after your Mother's Day tributes,  
to meet with any of you in the Conference Room at 4 PM  
in order for you to share with me  
what you think it is important for me to hear.  
I only see in a glass dimly, on this or on any issue in the church.  
Perhaps we may, through prayerful conversation,  
all see more clearly.  
Fourth, I do yearn something for you.  
I yearn that you find yourselves *abiding, staying with, persons,*  
who, in our construct of life,  
we may have avoided because we consider them 'unclean.'  
In relationship to this issue,  
right here in this congregation there are gay and lesbian persons  
who are devout, who love Jesus,  
who earnestly seek to live in obedience to God.  
Yet they are mainly *hidden from us.*  
For they are *not sure this community is a safe place*  
where they may honestly share who they are  
and what their faith journey has been.  
Also here among us in this congregation on this Mother's Day  
are *mothers of gay and lesbian children, and fathers as well:*  
mothers and fathers who keep quiet about their children  
whom they love and whom they honor;  
mothers and fathers who have much to share with us  
yet who do not feel safe or comfortable in sharing.  
I yearn that within this congregation we might find a way  
to stay with these persons,

Let us receive them and the stories of their journeys,  
Let us ponder those stories in light of the work of God Spirit.  
Fifth, I invite us all to *continue to reread scripture*,  
Let us entertain the notion that in past readings  
We may have been blinded to God's truth;  
Let us read scripture in the context of the whole witness of scripture;  
Let us listen afresh in scripture for God's word for the church in these days.  
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Finally, one person reflecting on this experience of Peter and the Early Church  
as they faced that most incendiary of challenges, said,  
*Faith, when it comes down to it,*  
*our often breathless attempt*  
*keep up with the redemptive activity of God,*  
*keep asking ourselves,*  
*What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?"*  
Willimon, p. 99

My prayer is, even as we may continue to differ,  
that we in this congregation will wrestle with that question together.  
In the end, that is what Peter was doing  
and invited his closest colleagues in the church to do with him.  
And in the end, by the work of the Spirit at work within them,  
they passed through that incendiary challenge *together*,  
as the one church of Jesus Christ.  
Thanks be to God.  
Amen.

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Pete Peery  
First Presbyterian Church, Asheville  
5th Sunday of Easter  
9 May 2004