

The Profanity of War—Acts 10: 1-28 (November 11, 2018)

Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche communities and modern day saint, speaking on the question of human identity asked, *how do we move from the security of our narrow identities into something larger, more expansive. How do we move from an identity we feel we have to defend against outsiders to an identity that embraces and encompasses the wisdom that we belong to each other?* For Peter, it happened because of a dream. To understand the profound and disturbing nature of this holy vision and the importance of the revelation it unleashes, we need to know some things about Judaism and those first Jesus followers.

First, we need to understand that dietary restrictions have long been an important part of what it means to be an observant Jew. Referred to as kashrut, dietary laws are a spiritual discipline that root Judaism in the concrete choices and details of daily life.¹ Second, this seems obvious to say but we seem to need reminding—Jesus was a Jew, he was circumcised at birth, followed the dietary laws, kept Passover and more. As were his first followers. Thus the dilemma that Peter and the early church face in our faith story this morning. Following the way of Jesus had been a straightforward religious affair when all the followers were Jewish. But, what to do when non-Jews, gentiles, like Cornelius want to become Jesus followers? Do you insist that they become Jews as well and keep to Jewish observances and laws?

That would have been a tough enough question for Peter, but then he has this dream, not a dream just about the church, but a very personal dream. In our faith story, Peter is famished and tired, and it's exhaustion that wins out. Even as a meal is being prepared, he falls into a trance, that middle state between sleep and wakefulness. Perhaps it's the smells of food, intermingling with this dilemma about the gentiles that causes him to have his vision. Has that happened to you, two things going in your life converging into one single, weird dream? That's what seems to happen to Peter. He has a vision of all the foods that he, as a Jew, is not supposed to eat with the baffling heavenly instructions, "Get up Peter, kill and eat...What God has made clean, you must not call profane."² Three times this happens, and three times, even though hungry, Peter refuses.

This was no small matter for Peter and for Jews in the first century. Jews were a minority population clinging to their identity under Roman occupation. Things like dietary laws weren't merely a matter of etiquette or peculiar culinary habits; they were a matter of survival and identity for Jews. We might see such things as trivial; it's a lot easier to be tolerant and open-minded when you don't feel threatened. But, for first century Jews, survival meant clinging to the everyday habits and rituals that set you

¹ Rabbi Ruth Sohn, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-purpose-of-kashrut/>

² Acts 10: 12-15.

apart, that made you distinctive. Yet, here is this vision challenging Peter and the Jewish followers of Jesus to find a different basis for their identity and survival.³

It's a compelling story for us on this Remembrance Sunday. Our identities can be so narrow and small. So much of violence and war comes from our lack of shared identity, from failing to see the sacred in the other. So much violence and war comes from taking it upon ourselves to impose judgements upon others and fragment the beautiful whole that is God's creation, calling what God has created, profane. On this 100th anniversary of the First World War armistice I came across a shocking example from that time. It was a revealing comment by the Russian General Maslov. Maslov described German children crying as they searched desperately for their parents in a blazing town. 'What was surprising,' wrote Maslov, 'was that they were crying in exactly the way that our children cry.' After Nazi propaganda had dehumanised the Russians, referring to them as *Untermenschen* (inferior people), Russian revenge propaganda had convinced its citizens that all Germans were heartless beasts.⁴ The general could not fathom that the other side's children were anything like his own. But, then again this story doesn't have the same shock value as it would have even five years ago. The U.S. President makes a habit of combining identity and fear, just in the last two weeks unleashing a horrendously racist ad in his bid to help his party in this past week's election. We are not immune to this phenomenon in Canada. In the cause of defending a narrow identity of what it means to be Canadian we've labelled and treated Indigenous people, Japanese, Black, Italian, Muslim and LGBTQ Canadians, as the other—profane, stains, blemishes on the purity of the white, straight, Christian Canadian ideal. What God has made clean, let no one call profane.

Remembrance Sunday reminds us that we are called to forsake our small, narrow identities and open ourselves up to a larger, shared identity. I got wondering about Peter's dream, his vision, trying to come up with something comparable in our time, something that is causing us to re-define ourselves. What came to me was that first image of our home, the Earth taken from the moon. That paradigm altering image placed us all, all our differences, all our history, all our creations on a singular sphere floating in space. Now though, we have images of our galaxy, the Milky Way, in which we are a far-flung outpost, a tiny dot among billions of tiny dots. And our galaxy itself is one among billions. Such images inspire awe. Our differences seem so trivial compared to what unites us. Our need to pull together becomes so obvious in the face of such fragility and vulnerability. The vision is there, God's new dream calling us to find a new basis for our identity and survival.

Our uniqueness as individuals, as nations, as religions each contribute a piece to the Truth, but none of us encompasses the whole Truth. That is the deeper truth that lies

³ William Willimon, *Acts (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1988, p. 95-96.

⁴ Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, p. 199. Found in a sermon by an unknown author, Preached at St Margaret's Newlands, Glasgow, November 2012, <https://cmethuen.wordpress.com/2012/11/>.

beyond all our differences. In this era, that emphasizes self-esteem and the empowerment of oppressed groups, what gets emphasized is that our specialness as individuals, ethnic groups, religions and so on lies in our differences, in our uniqueness. There is truth in that; it is a legitimate and expected reaction when mainstream society and its institutions (including the church) take it upon themselves to narrowly define what it means to be Canadian, Christian, civilized. It is an understandable reaction to political, religious and cultural imperialism; when one group of people tries to dominate another. Just as the Romans did to Jews. But, this progressive focus on difference only takes us part of the way on the road to healing. At the heart of scripture this morning is a deeper message. Our specialness is really rooted in a relationship, in which our differences and our uniqueness are part of a larger Truth, a deeper Reality, a profound Wholeness. Here we come to the limits of language, so we just use the word God. Our specialness is rooted in our relationship with God.

On this Remembrance Sunday it is right that we should name people and remember them, it is right that we should remember the horrors of war to ground ourselves in the folly of thinking any of us have a hold on truth. We would also do well to remember a more positive and hopeful memory, a memory inside each one of us—our foundational unity as creatures imbued with sacredness. What God has made clean, we shall not call profane, we shall accept as gift and grace. That is God's dream for us, may it live forever.

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