

*Landmarks on the Road to Reconciliation*

Acts 10:1-11:18 (paraphrased)

Several years ago I went on a hiking vacation, to Sedona, Arizona. I was with both my sisters, and it was the first time any of us had been to Sedona. I'm not much of a trip planner, but one of my sisters had researched hiking in the Arizona mountains, and she was really excited for us to experience a vortex. You probably know what a vortex is, but I really didn't at the time. A vortex is (and this is right out of the Sedona Chamber of Commerce brochure) 'a swirling center of energy that is conducive to healing, meditation and self-exploration. Vortexes are places where the earth seems especially alive with energy.' The beautiful, steep mountains and hiking trails around Sedona are supposedly full of these places, where you can feel the earth's energy enter your body and heal you, or shift something inside of you. Some of the vortexes are marked on maps; some of them you might just happen upon.

I rolled my eyes a little, but we set out to find those vortexes right away. The first day, we chose a hike in a place that was known to have a big vortex, one that the guidebooks pointed out. It might even have had a name; I can't quite remember. We never felt it. We spent the next few days of hiking trying to find the vortex on each trail. A ranger told us to look for a cairn—a stack of rocks that someone would have put up to mark the spot. And still, we never *felt* what we thought a vortex was supposed to feel like.

On the last day of the trip, someone told us the vortex was 'just around the bend in the river'. When we got to the bend, each of us went a different direction, to sit by ourselves so that we could try to feel whatever we were supposed to feel. Still nothing! Finally we got up and began to walk again...and then we came around a corner, and this is what we saw. A whole field of cairns, hundreds of stacks of rocks that hikers before us had built in one spot along the hiking trail. It took my breath away. I still wasn't sure I was feeling whatever a vortex was supposed to feel like, but the fact that all those other people had felt something here and stopped to mark this spot turned this place into holy ground. Here, something had happened. Other people had left the evidence of it for us to find. If I couldn't identify the place where the energy of the earth was swirling, well, someone else had. And their reverence carried me along into feeling something extraordinary too. Just being in that place, at that moment, seeing the markers of their experience, moved me. Their story became part of my story.

Paul Elie, the writer of a book called *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, wrote about what it means to be on a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage, he said, is 'a journey undertaken in the light of a story.' A story that has already been written, or told, by someone who came before you. To go on a pilgrimage is to follow a path someone else has made. Someone in whose footsteps you are now walking, whose story *then* is making sense of your story *now*. Someone has left markers behind them, so that you can find and follow the same road they took. In fact, this is what it means to live in a religious tradition: to acknowledge that you are walking on a spiritual path that someone else has taken before. To know that your life is an echo of a story that has been told before, a larger story than the one you are writing by yourself.

Last week I said that I wanted to tell you two stories from the Book of Acts, the history of the Christian Church in its first hundred years. We talked about the conversion of Saul, that moment on the road to Damascus when something happened to Saul that came so suddenly and so sharply

that it left him dazed and blind and different. A ‘catalytic event’ we called it—a moment of waking up that shook him to his core. From that moment on, the trajectory of his life changed dramatically. Paul went from trouncing through the early Christian communities enforcing Jewish regulations to being the champion of an open, welcoming, inclusive Christianity.

This week I want to tell you about another catalytic event, told in the very next chapter of the Book of Acts. This one happened to Simon Peter, the disciple who was with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry all the way to the end. Peter too was Jewish. He too had grown up in the Jewish tradition of Jesus, stopping work on every Sabbath, assuming that every man was circumcised, staying far away from foods that had been declared unclean thousands of years ago. He’d heard Jesus challenge some of those traditions, but you know how the sayings of Jesus are. Sometimes the things Jesus suggested are just so *hard*, so principled and idealistic, that you just can’t imagine he meant them seriously, or that he meant them for you. Peter thought the same thing. So even though he’d heard Jesus talk about the Kingdom of God on earth looking like a flourishing life for *every* person, what Peter heard in his head was every *Jewish* person. It never crossed his mind that now, when he preached and invited people into the community of Jesus-followers, he was leaving out whole swaths of people who had not been born Jewish, who weren’t circumcised, who grew up eating pork and shellfish. He just wasn’t talking to them at all. He didn’t even see them.

Until the story you heard in the text we read today. The story begins with a vision, a daydream of sorts. Peter was hungry, and while he was waiting for lunch to be ready, Peter saw angels carry down from heaven and lay out in front of him a tablecloth filled with foods no faithful Jew would ever, ever eat. ‘Go ahead,’ the angels said; ‘Eat. It’s OK. Nothing God has made is unclean.’ So weird, I imagine Peter thought. And I bet Peter put that vision completely out of his mind as he went downstairs and ate the same matzoh-ball soup he’d eaten every other day of his life.

But then, the next day, Peter found himself at the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. And it wasn’t just Cornelius there. Cornelius had invited everyone he knew—cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors, in-laws—to come meet Peter because Peter was, well, a little bit famous. He’d known Jesus.

You know what happens when people get together like that? They bring food, and they eat together. There was Peter, in a house full of non-Jews who were filling their plates with all those foods that Peter had never touched in his life, foods that Jews were never even supposed to let within ten feet of them. At first, Peter was horrified. But then, suddenly, that vision came back to him, those angels saying, ‘Nothing God has made is unclean.’

Oh. Now I get it.

After lunch, they asked Peter to tell them some stories about Jesus. And Peter told those stories like he’d never told them before. I came for *all* people, he remembered Jesus saying. Jesus healed *all* who came to him; he freed *everyone* who need saving. As he talked, Peter was hearing different words than he’d noticed before. When he got to the end, Cornelius and his friends seemed as moved, as ready to follow Jesus, as any Jew ever had. They asked if they could belong, if they might be welcomed as part of the Christian community. Peter baptized them. Every one of them.

There's a moment in this story, just after Cornelius has explained to Peter that he'd had a vision too, that angels had appeared to him and told him that Peter would bring good news to *them*, when the light flashes on for Peter. For the first time, it occurs to Peter that he and his Church might have drawn the lines around them too small for what God had imagined. Peter says, 'I am learning—I see now--that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another.' In the words of *The Message*, "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites!" (Acts 10:34)

It would be hard to explain what a tectonic shift this moment was in the life of the early Church. Peter went back and explained to his co-leaders what he'd done. And at first they were skeptical. *You went to a Gentile's house? You ate their food?!* But then Peter said, 'It felt to me like God was at work...and I couldn't stand in God's way.' And at that moment, the Christian Church moved toward being a different thing than it had been before.

From that moment on, unity—becoming a community courageous enough to cross boundaries and reach across differences became the central feature of the Christian Church. It wasn't just about declaring that Jews and Gentiles were equal in God's eyes; it was about being in relationship, becoming like family to one another across the differences that until that point had defined them, told them what they were called, given them their names: Jew, Gentile.

The Church became the people on earth who declared, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; no male or female; all of us are one in Christ Jesus.' Think about how radical a statement that was—then and now. It says no difference of race or class or gender is too big to be bridged by the love of God. It says every person is equally valued and wholly worthy of dignity--in God's eyes and in ours. It says that every system on earth that favors one group of people over another is working against the purposes of God. Breaking God's heart.

We are living in that system: a system of laws and rights and economies that favors the people we call 'white' over all others. This is what black people in this country have been trying to tell us for generations. It's what the movement of the Spirit is signaling among us now.

They are calling us back to being *The Church*, to finding our place on the path that Christians before us have marked, a path that says no one's life is expendable, or disposable, or unworthy of our respect and compassion.

Phil Vischer, the maker of Veggie Tales, that series of animated Bible stories for children, has done a video called *Race in America*. I hope you'll watch it for yourself on YouTube; it traces the history of systemic racism in America, how black Americans have been excluded from the good this country offers to many. It has lots of good information in it. But right now I want you to see just the end of it:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGUwcs9qJXY> (15:23-17:35)

We are not the first people to walk on this path. This is a pilgrimage. People of great faith, followers of Jesus, have come before us. We need to find their footsteps and do whatever it takes to walk in them.

