

5th Sunday of Easter 2016
April 24, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Last week on Reconciling in Christ Sunday we heard a powerful sermon from Good Shepherd member Amalia Vagts. In her sermon, Amalia shared her own story. She felt a strong call to ordained ministry but when she came out publicly as bisexual in college in the 1990s, Amalia learned that our church body, the ELCA, would not affirm her call to ministry. Thankfully, Amalia now does powerful ministry - working for our whole church body to recognize and celebrate the gifts of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer people who are called to ministry. Her work has helped to bring about change in the ELCA.

I'm so grateful that Amalia shared her story because so often it is stories, much more than theological arguments, that open us to other people and to what God is up to in our world. We see this in our reading from Acts today. Peter was criticized by other believers for doing something they thought was unfaithful. Rather than getting into an argument with them, Peter told his story. When we hear Peter's story, it may seem really strange. Visions, voices from heaven, unclean animals, circumcision - all that can feel really removed from our lives. But we actually have a lot in common with Peter and those first believers. They were trying to make sense of their lives in the midst of all sorts of upheaval and uncertainty. Everything was up for grabs, even the dead weren't staying dead, and nothing was quite making sense.

In the face of all that, there was one thing they thought they knew for sure: **they** were God's chosen people and Gentiles, that is non-Jews, were not. The first believers understood themselves to be Jewish followers of Jesus. As Jews, their laws required them to eat only with other circumcised men and to avoid unclean or, as we'd say, non-kosher foods. These laws were central to their identity and their way of living as God's people in the world.

So when the first believers heard that Peter had eaten unclean food with uncircumcised men, they were alarmed.

- This could get in the way of sharing the good news of Jesus with other Jews.
- This could also put the new church at risk from the Roman Empire. Rome allowed circumcised Jews to practice their ancient faith but required everyone else to worship the emperor and sought to crush new religious movements. If followers of Jesus let in uncircumcised men, Gentiles, the power of Rome could come down upon them.

What would Peter's actions mean for the new movement? Was this safe? Was this right? Would this get in the way of evangelism? The other apostles and believers questioned and criticized Peter for taking such risks.

Peter responded by telling his story. He could have responded by arguing, "Doesn't God love all people including the Gentiles? Is it fair that we keep the Gospel to ourselves?" Instead, he shared how God's Spirit had worked in his life to help him see that he could eat non-kosher food with non-Jews, and that he should not make distinctions between Gentiles and Jews, or as he put it, "between us and them." When the other apostles and believers heard his story, they were silent. They stopped criticizing and questioning Peter and listened to what God was doing in bringing Gentiles into God's story. They began to see for themselves that God did, in fact, love all people including Gentiles.

Peter's story was a story the early church needed to hear and it's a story we need to hear in **this** time of upheaval and uncertainty as we try to make sense of our lives and what God is up to in this tumultuous early

21st century. These days it can feel like everything is up for grabs. All our major institutions are facing turmoil - government, healthcare, banking, education and the church are all changing rapidly. The mainline church is experiencing a steep decline in influence and membership even as new forms of Christianity and spiritual expression are emerging everywhere. Long established patterns of doing the work of the church are dying and new patterns are arising. There is much in this that is exciting but it is also unsettling.

On a global scale we're seeing the greatest numbers of people on the move as migrants and refugees that the world has ever seen. We face all sorts of threats from climate change, economic turmoil and religious extremism. All of this can bring about anxiety and fear. And anxiety so often leads to black and white, "us and them", thinking. It can cause us to do what those first believers did - make distinctions based on religion, politics, sexuality, and race. In the face of anxiety, it can also be comforting to have an enemy to blame. For the first believers it was the Gentiles and Rome. In this election cycle in the US, the enemy has been Muslims, Mexicans, the establishment, Wall Street, multinational corporations, supporters of the other candidates, and the other party.

With so much blame going around, in the midst of so much fear, it can be tempting to stay with like minded people, to try to play it safe, to avoid doing anything controversial - anything that could bring criticism. Yet Peter was told not to make distinctions. He was led to take risks. He was called to the home of a man named Cornelius who, we learn earlier in Acts, was a Roman centurion, an enemy. When Peter went to Cornelius's home, he learned Cornelius's story. He discovered that Cornelius was devout - he feared God, prayed and gave generously to the Jewish people. He learned that an angel had told Cornelius to send for Peter and to learn from Peter. As Peter heard Cornelius's story he discovered God was at work in the life of an enemy. And then as Peter told Cornelius and his household the story of Jesus, Peter witnessed the Spirit descending upon them just as it had on the apostles. All of this confirmed for Peter that God was at work even in a Roman centurion. And when he told the story to the other apostles and believers, they saw it too.

This story of Peter and Cornelius helped the early church to move beyond the "us and them" distinctions and to be open to what God was doing to bring good news to all people. This same story can do the same for us. It helps us to see how much we miss when we separate ourselves into groups of "us and them". It reminds us that God is at work in the stories and the lives of people we so often consider "the other" and even "the enemy." So if we want to be open to God and make sense of the world in this time of change, it is important for us to be open to even "those people" and to find ways to hear their stories.

And Peter's story reminds us that if we are seeking to make the church and our society more open to "the other", sharing stories works better than theological arguments. All of this openness can be hard to pull off on our own. It is hard to listen to the stories of people who make us afraid. It can be hard to keep telling our stories. We need community. We also need what was a key component of both Peter and Cornelius's stories - prayer. They both spent time in prayer. Prayer helped them to encounter the Spirit that called them to move beyond distinctions. Prayer gave them the courage to move beyond their comfort zones and encounter the other.

Prayer can do the same for us. So let's take a few moments in prayer ourselves.