



**“NIMBY or YIGBY and Radical Grace”
Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2024
Acts 10; John 15:9-17
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

Radical grace has fallen on the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the ELCA. Walls are crumbling. Barriers are being broken. At our Synod Assembly yesterday we elected as our new bishop a gay man, Pastor Bryan Penman. He is not the ELCA's first gay bishop, nor is this his primary identity – rather, he is mainly known as a delightful, warm, witty, humorous, and caring human being. But following on the election of the ELCA's first black female bishop six years ago, Patricia Davenport, it does seem that our Synod continues to be a conduit for God's radical grace.

Radical grace is also the striking message of our Acts reading today just as it was last week, when Philip ended up baptizing someone who stood completely outside of what was permissible under Jewish law. Today in Acts we have an even more stunning demonstration of God's Spirit breaking down old barriers. To see it clearly, let's rewind to the beginning of Acts 10 and think of it as a five-part miniseries.

Episode 1: The Surprise. We meet Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army stationed in the Caesarea by the Sea, which was the seat of Judea's Roman governor where several infantry cohorts tried to keep the peace between Syrians and Jews. Like some Romans who had adopted local religious customs but did not fulfill all the requirements of becoming Jewish, he was a devout man who prayed constantly. It was at the final prayer of the day, at the ninth hour, that God terrified Cornelius by sending an angel to give him a message to send men to Joppa to find Peter, who is staying with Simon the tanner, and escort him back to Caesarea.

What can I do to begin or to maintain a set time of prayer? What challenges might I expect? How might I be surprised?

Episode 2: The Confusion. Simon the tanner's house was not hard to find because of the odors the business produced. Jews would avoid such a place because of the handling of carcasses and Gentiles avoided it because of the stench. Why is Peter staying in such a place? Already we get hints of walls beginning to crumble. As the men approach, Peter gets the shock of his life – maybe even a greater shock than seeing the risen Jesus. He's been lounging on the rooftop has become hungry, and then receives a bizarre vision – three times -- of a large sheet containing all kinds of animals being lowered before him as a voice says, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.”

First stunned, then shocked, Peter finally discerns that God is telling him that strict Jewish dietary laws must be broken. These are perhaps THE most important way Jews remained distinct from the surrounding Gentile culture. Peter knows that these laws are a matter of survival and identify for Jews. How can God be asking him to break a cardinal rule of the Jewish faith?

Lord, how are you calling me to let go of old ways of thinking that are keeping the power of your Spirit from moving freely through my life?

Episode 3: The Escort

As if things weren't confusing enough for Peter, just then the men sent by Cornelius show up. In case he's inclined to refuse to admit Gentiles into the house, the Spirit tells him, "Get over it, I've sent them to you so just go down and open the door." The men explain their mission, telling them that an angel spoke to a Roman centurion – this had to be yet another shock for Peter – and that he has requested Peter come because he needs to hear what Peter has to say.

Lord, my schedule is not my own. I might make plans, but my day is ultimately yours to decide. Allow me the privilege of being the answer to someone's prayer. Holy Spirit, please interrupt me anytime as you work out your great plan of salvation.

Episode 4: The Encounter

Another barrier falls when Peter, who is well known among Jews, steps over the threshold into Cornelius' home. This is the first time he's ever been in a Gentile house. Excited about his guest, Cornelius has already gathered several relatives and close friends. When Peter politely asks what he's expected to do, Cornelius tells how the angel told him to send for Peter. "And now we are all ready to listen to what the Lord has commanded you to say."

This could be someone's worst nightmare - an audience for a big speech that hasn't yet been written! But the Spirit takes over probably shocks even Peter with what comes out, something that shakes the very foundations of all distinctions of faith and culture.

Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." *No partiality*. Neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, Greek nor Roman: Everyone is on an equal footing. In an instant God has rearranged Peter's entire understanding of what is in and out. Everything is in – nothing is out! God shows no partiality.

Peter's speech gathers steam as he explains everything about Jesus, God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, that the disciples were witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem, how he was put to death by crucifixion but then God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to those chosen by God as witnesses, how he commanded them to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead, and on and on, until....

Episode 5: The Interruption

WHILE PETER WAS STILL SPEAKING, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone present! What a wild scene it must have been! Astounded, Peter looks around at the Jews who had come along and asks them, "Can anyone withhold baptism from these people, these Gentiles, who have received the Holy spirit just as we have?"

But...did you hear the phrase? These people. Peter said it himself. These people, these outsiders, these people who until that moment he never imagined to be worthy of the gift of the spirit. We can't help asking: Who are "these people" today, in our context?

Let me suggest that the relevant question for us is not “who can eat at my table,” since we agree that all are welcome where table fellowship is concerned, but rather, “Who can live in my back yard?”

Unfortunately, too often the answer too often is: No one who doesn’t look or live like I do – as in this example from Florida of a proposed group home for low-income residents with mental disabilities that met with stiff local opposition – or any number of proposals for low-income multifamily or group homes in areas that are single-family only, where residents band together to say: Not in my back yard.

One could argue that the greatest crisis facing our communities today after gun violence is affordable housing. If we are to truly live into the commandment Jesus gives us that we love one another, this must also extend not only to differences of gender, sexuality, and skin color, but also to income status – including those with no income status at all.

It’s far too easy to say “Love one another,” and let it go at that. The hard question is: How DO we carry out this commandment? Like Peter, we must be open to the Spirit’s power so that God can change our thinking. To break in and help us see things completely differently.

For example, instead of being NIMBYs like this Florida community that rejected a proposal for a group home for low-income persons with mental disabilities, how can we learn to think like YIGBYs – for Yes in God’s Back Yard, an initiative making its way through Congress that would allow churches and faith-based colleges and other institutions to bypass zoning regulations and allocate land they own, or church buildings that close, to affordable housing projects? Stable housing DOES save lives! I’ve heard it said that churches account for more undeveloped land than any other modern institution.

Fortunately there are several examples now around the country, including Washington DC, Atlanta and Los Angeles, of church buildings or property being dedicated to affordable housing projects. This is one Lutheran group that is helping just such a bill move through the Arizona state legislature.

Here at Grace we don’t have land to give, but we can begin to think as YIGBY people. Let’s follow Peter’s lead in casting off our old comfort zones and opening ourselves to fresh expressions of God’s radical grace, just as our Synod assembly did yesterday. Let’s live in a way that makes “those people” into “our people.” Only then can we begin to do the work of God’s kingdom as Jesus has laid it out for us.

“The church IS alive,” Bishop-Elect Penman breathlessly told the Assembly in his final remarks yesterday. “The Spirit IS moving. And the Spirit will guide us into a more beautiful church than we could ever have imagined.” Let’s open our hearts and minds so that we, like Peter, like the 350 at yesterday’s Synod Assembly, can be astounded by the Spirit’s power.