

What Kind of Critter Are You?

In yesterday's Wichita Eagle, there was an article about the pop star known as Prince, who died this past Thursday. In this article, President Obama was quoted as saying of Prince, "A strong spirit transcends rules." I invite you to remember that quote, and maybe even write it down. It's perfect for today's sermon!

Let's look at this morning's text. Did Peter know what could happen to him when he went "up to Jerusalem?" Did he remember what had happened to Jesus the last time he went up to Jerusalem? If so, he doesn't appear to care. But then, this is a very different Peter than the one who had denied Jesus three times after his arrest. This Peter had been thoroughly forgiven and restored by the Resurrected Christ. This Peter had received the Holy Spirit, with its mysterious power. This Peter had used that power to heal a man named Aeneas, who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. And right on the heels of that, this Peter had raised to life a woman named Tabitha, who had died after a serious illness. This Peter wasn't afraid of anything.

When he went up to Jerusalem, it wasn't the High Priest, scribes and Pharisees he had to face. It was fellow believers in the Resurrected Christ. They quickly and sternly criticized him, saying "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Now these men may have believed in Jesus, but they were still Jewish, just like Peter was still Jewish. And ever since Genesis 17, all Jewish males had adopted the painful practice of being circumcised as a sign of their covenant with God. Any male who was uncircumcised was NOT part of the covenant. They were a Gentile. They were unclean. And Jews simply did not associate with Gentiles. To do so made YOU unclean.

If this sounds ludicrous to us, to them it was serious business. It was part of their identity as a chosen people, a holy people set apart by God. God had commanded male circumcision. It was a permanent part of the Mosaic law. And so were a host of other laws intended to keep the Israelites distinct and separate from the rest of the world's population.

A good number of these laws had to do with eating meat—what kind of meat they could eat, what kind they couldn't, and how that meat should be prepared. All toward the crucial goal of keeping the insiders separate from the outsiders.

Peter's accusers were correct, of course. He had eaten with uncircumcised men, and in so doing, not only had he made himself unclean, but he had violated Holy Scripture. And now, it was time for Peter to explain himself.

The former Peter might have impatiently, angrily argued with them. But not this Peter. This Peter begins to calmly, patiently explain it to them, step by step. It had all started, you see, with a vision. Make that two visions, one experienced by Peter while he was in Joppa, the other experienced by a Gentile named Cornelius. Cornelius' vision was simple and brief; he was simply told to send to Joppa for a man named Peter. Peter's vision was considerably more complex. In it, as we heard, he saw a large sheet being lowered from heaven. In this sheet were all manner of critters, including four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds of the air. And then Peter hears a voice from heaven saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

The horrifying problem was that many of those animals were not on Peter's properly prescribed, scripturally sound kill and eat list. It was a test; it had to be a test. Peter had already

failed one test, and he wasn't about to fail another. "By no means, Lord. Nothing profane or unclean has ever so much as entered my mouth." And the mysterious voice replied, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

What?! Was this voice saying that Scripture was wrong? That was unthinkable. That is, until three men appeared at Peter's door, and the Holy Spirit tells him to go with the men, whereupon Peter met Cornelius, and heard about Cornelius' vision, and right at that moment, there before Peter's eyes, the Holy Spirit fell upon not just Cornelius but his entire household. Just as it had fallen upon Peter and his fellow disciples at Pentecost. I love Peter's sincere explanation to his critics: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" In other words, because of what the Holy Spirit had done, those Gentiles were no longer Gentiles, no longer unclean, no longer outsiders beyond the pale of God's love and salvation. The door to God's kingdom had been thrown wide open. Remember President Obama's quote? "A strong spirit transcends rules."

Here at Lorraine, it appears that we've transcended a few rules. We have a "Statement of Welcome" which we print on every single bulletin and newsletter. It's also on our church's web site for God and everybody to see. It reads as follows: "We welcome all persons without regard to their race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, social status, education, ability, or any other factor subject to discrimination and exclusion in the world."

The statement omits any mention of circumcision. Funny how that one no longer seems to matter. But what about that one in the middle? Did you catch that? Something about "sexual orientation?" Is the statement referring to homosexuality? By no means, Lord! We will never welcome homosexuals in our church, nor anyone else in the LGBTQ alphabet soup. There are at least five passages in the Bible, and maybe more, that say homosexuality is a sin. And so therefore is gay marriage. Not to mention gay ordination.

Except, what today's story in the Bible appears to be teaching us is that the Holy Spirit trumps Scripture. And why wouldn't it, considering the Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of God, alive, moving, and working in our midst? So ten years ago, when the Holy Spirit led Sherri Stapleton to want to be baptized and join this church, who were we to hinder God? I'll never forget how she shouted "yahoo" after we baptized her in the Ninnescah River! It was a cry of pure, Holy Spirit-filled, rule transcending joy!

When the Holy Spirit led such gifted individuals as Linda Gebert, CB Balbierz, and Erica Schmidt to our church, who were we to hinder God? And when hundreds if not thousands of LGBTQ believers want to make Mennonite Church USA their Church, and when the Spirit leads them to bravely and persistently, year after year, cry out for inclusion, who are we to hinder God?

Makes we wonder how else we may be hindering God. And whom else we may be excluding that the Holy Spirit wants us to include. By no means, Lord! May we never hinder your love and grace. May we never call "unclean" what you have made clean! May we always remember that all God's critters got a place in the choir! Help us to read and interpret scripture rightly, lest it become a cause of our blindness. Give us the courage and patience of Peter as we proclaim for all to hear your gospel of welcome, inclusion, and mercy. May we have his same strong spirit within us!

Amen.