

A Gospel Net

Acts 11:1-18

Peter had a vision of a huge net lowered from heaven that caught within it all kinds of unclean animals, animals that Peter as a faithful Jew was forbidden to eat. Have you ever watched one of those far out shows about eating food in exotic places? They delight in showing people eating live insect larvae, toasted crickets and animal parts that I don't even like to think about. I once watched Anthony Bourdain in the Travel Channel TV show, *No Reservations*, eating really gross parts of a wart hog with a pygmy tribe in southern Africa. There's a strange entertainment value in watching someone else eat something that looks repulsive, but I sure wouldn't want to be the one sharing in that meal. I imagine that Peter felt a similar revulsion when the voice from heaven told him, "*Get up, Peter; kill and eat.*" But God was doing something much, much bigger than doing away with food regulations for Jesus' followers. God was using Peter to reach out to people who had formerly been written off as unacceptable, unclean, outside of God's grace.

Can you imagine a huge net coming down over Stamford? A Gospel net, coming down from heaven for a 2-mile radius around St. John's Church, to reach, to embrace, to challenge, to give new life and hope to all sorts and conditions of people? Caught within that Gospel net might be day laborers standing along State Street waiting for someone to pick them up and give them work. Caught within that Gospel net would be thousands of business men and women hard at work in offices and cubicles in modern tall office buildings all around us. Caught in that net we might find families at St. Luke's Lifeworks on Franklin Street sheltered for now, but struggling to find a way out of poverty and homelessness. Caught in that gospel net would be well-to-do residents of fancy condominiums as well as poorer residents in subsidized housing. That Gospel net might snare some of the tens of thousands of drivers whizzing by St. John's on the way to and from other places. That Gospel net would capture children and adults, teenagers hanging out at McDonalds and the Mall, college students at U-Conn, all sorts and conditions of folk, an amazingly diverse group of people.

What if God were to tell us to claim all those people in that Gospel net for his love, for his grace? How would we try to reach them? How would we translate our church words, our traditional Anglican liturgy, our faith, our hope in Christ, into words and actions that could be understood and received by the different types of folk caught in the embrace of that Gospel net?

Jesus was always pushing the envelope, always welcoming people deemed unacceptable into God's fold. "*Why do you eat with sinners and tax collectors?*" Jesus was asked again and again. So Jesus told them that a physician does not come to heal those who are already well, but to the sick and needy. Jesus rarely did the proper thing. He spoke with despised Samaritans, he broke with convention by speaking to women, he ate with tax collectors and sinners, he healed the sick even on the Sabbath, he touched lepers, he raised the dead, and he forgave sins. Many scholars believe that it was Jesus' radical welcome to all, especially his sharing in fellowship with Jews who made themselves as Gentiles by their failure to keep the law, that ultimately led authorities to arrange his arrest and execution.

After Jesus' crucifixion, after he rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, they carried on his ministry. They were sharing the good news of Jesus' victory over death, of forgiveness of sins, of new life in Christ, of power and healing experienced through an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. But they shared that amazing good news – as Jesus had before them – only among God's chosen people, their own fellow Jews. In accordance with the Jewish law they would not even enter into the home of a Gentile or consider such a person worthy of the good news of Jesus.

All that changed when Peter had his vision and three Gentiles from Caesarea arrived to ask him to come and give them a message by which their entire household could be saved. And so, under the Spirit's inspiration Peter went. He did the unthinkable by entering a Gentile's home and receiving their hospitality. He offered them the same message of hope and good news as he had been proclaiming his own people. And these uncircumcised Gentiles received his message with joy. And more than that they were literally filled with the Holy Spirit.

Back at the home office in Jerusalem, Peter was called on the carpet for having shared the gospel message with the uncircumcised. Peter didn't try to defend himself or justify his actions, or develop a theology about the new thing God was doing; he simply told his story. The welcome and sharing of new life with the Gentiles was God's action all the way. God had broken down this seemingly impenetrable barrier. Seven of his companions also witnessed it. And who was Peter that he should try and hinder God?

Breaking down those barriers and expanding the message of good news to those not born into Judaism, was a huge paradigm shift. It was a game changer. Furthermore, it was God's action and not the early Church's deliberate choice. Because of what God did through Peter, the Apostles could now take Jesus' message of new life literally to the whole world, to people everywhere.

And thanks be to God for that, for without breaking down that barrier you and I would not be welcomed as recipients of God's grace. We are among those uncircumcised Gentiles that the other Apostles were appalled that Peter had spent time with. Without God acting in this new way and without the early Church's embrace of this dramatic shift in thinking, we would not be here today.

There is a principle here we should pay attention to. God is always reaching out to extend the boundaries of his grace to all people. Inclusion is God's work.

How can we extend our boundaries? Is it possible that we, without meaning to, have erected all kinds of barriers that make it difficult for people outside this parish community to hear and receive the good news of new life in Jesus? What barriers block people from wanting to enter our doors, and block us from reaching out to them? Yesterday at the healing conference a woman told me she drove around the block three times looking for our Church on Grove Street. The building she saw there didn't look like a church to her. Only when one of our greeters standing on the street asked her if she was looking for the healing conference did she realize she was in the right place. That's both an example of a barrier and someone working to overcome it.

When we think of all the different kinds of people who could be caught in the Gospel net in what really is *our territory, our turf*; who gets your attention? Is it the vibrant business community all around us in the weekday-world? Is it day laborers? Is it the many residents living in apartments and condominiums? Is it single adults; is it families? Is it children and teens? Is it people in need? Is it college students? I doubt that we can reach out effectively to all at once, but if we were to focus on one demographic group to reach out and get to know, and to open our doors wide for them to come in, which group would that be? We would need to better learn that demographic group's perspective and language, their values and stories.

Another way we could expand our boundaries and break down our barriers is to let God speak in a deeper way outside the safe ways and places where we expect him to be. How can we let God speak to us outside the altar rail, outside the church itself, in the challenges of our daily lives? With this weekend's conference on healing, how can we invite God to touch us more deeply with his healing touch? How can we let God break through the boundaries and barriers within ourselves as persons to transform and heal not just our appearance but our hearts and lives?

Remember that expanding the gospel message to Gentiles was not Peter's doing or action, but God's action. Peter simply witnessed God at work and embraced what God was doing. God is always breaking through the limits we set for him. God is always breaking through the barriers we knowingly or unknowingly erect that block his love from going further and deeper. How can we be part of that work?

Imagine the doors of this church opened wider and wider for all to come in. Imagine going out with that Gospel net to embrace all people in our *Gospel turf*. Imagine letting God touch us as individuals in a deeper way. Imagine our limits and barriers and boundaries being broken through and broken down as God reaches out further and further through you and me with his loving embrace. Amen. May it be. May it be.