

“How Pigs In a Blanket Saved the World”

Acts 11:1-18

May 2, 2010

My friend, and preacher extraordinaire, Marty Singley, tells the story of an Easter Sunday when a young guy came home from college for the holiday. To humor his parents, he attended Easter services, even though he was now far too sophisticated and smart to believe in anything like God. After the service had ended and the last “Alleluia’s!” had been sung, he had a moment to speak with the pastor he had known since he was a little boy. She asked how he was doing. “Fine,” he answered, “but I have to tell you, I don’t believe anymore.” “What don’t you believe?” she asked. “I don’t believe in any of that religious God-stuff anymore.” The pastor paused and then said, “Who the heck cares?” Well, that was NOT the kind of response he thought he was going to get. “Who the heck cares?” What the heck kind of answer is that? So he went back to school and got on with his life. Got his degree. Got a job. Got married. Had children. But still, he was troubled by the pastor’s Easter question. He thought about it a lot. Struggled with it. Wrestled with it. And somehow, all that thinking and struggling and wrestling led him – over time - to a conversion experience! He became a believer again! And he couldn’t wait to go back home to tell his pastor. The next Easter – ten years after that momentous “Who the heck cares?” question was asked - he brought his family to services at his old home church. After the service had ended and the last “Alleluia’s!” had been sung, he sought out the pastor. She was happy to see him, and asked how he was doing. He blurted out, “I know you’re not going to believe this, but I believe again!” “What do you believe?” she asked. “I believe in God and all that religious stuff again!” She looked at him and after a pause – said, “Who the heck cares?” Stunned, the young man walked away. “Who the heck cares?” What the heck kind of answer is that? So life went on and the years rolled by. The young man grew older and, as he did, his beliefs swung back and forth. But somewhere along the line, his theology seemed to be less important than the realities he faced. One such reality was the declining health of his parents, especially his dad who was lost in the world of Alzheimer’s. He moved his family back home to be closer to his parents, and devoted himself to their care. Along the way, he met other people struggling with the same illness in their families, and they came together to help each other out. They gave respite care to each other, they sat with each other’s loved ones, they went to workshops and shared information, and they even planned outings when they took their parents to ballgames, to picnics, and even – one Easter – to church! This man’s home church! So there they were, this group of people in all their unsightly glory, sitting in the congregation on Easter Sunday. One lady insisted on singing a song whose tune and lyrics were nothing more than gibberish, and she sang it all the service long. One man smelled of a public restroom, and another just swayed back and forth incessantly. After the service was over and the “Alleluia’s!” had been sung, the man sought out the pastor. She was glad to see him, and asked how he was doing. “Well, I’m okay, but I’m not really sure WHAT I believe or don’t believe anymore!” “Tell me about all those people you were with.” “Oh, we’re just people who need each other, and my dad and the others like him need all of us to make sure they’re loved and included as best we can.” After a pause, the pastor reached out, touched his shoulder and said, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!”

Where did this man find resurrection? Beliefs and doctrine? Both useful for describing resurrection, but they are not resurrection. If you want to find resurrection, what is it the Bible

says? Where two or three are gathered... So, call me a heretic if you want – I've been called worse - but the reality of Easter really has very little to do with what you believe.

In fact, Peter seems to suggest that the resurrection of Jesus says more about WHO YOU INCLUDE! Radical, he is! But, look what happened to him and pay attention because what happened to Peter is what gets Christians in a lot of trouble – God gave him a vision. God's visions will get you into trouble. Peter wasn't taking the initiative to stir things up– he wasn't like that. But, a vision CAME to him. He didn't ask for it. Probably didn't want it. And, certainly did not want to have to struggle with what it meant. But, when God sends a vision, our opinions are not his first priority.

Peter is minding his own business, and lo and behold, we get the original pig in a blanket. A blanket comes down from heaven full of unclean food like pork. A voice says, "I haven't created church potlucks yet, but eat up. Really, this pork is just out of this world." I'm sure Peter's stomach turned, and he said, "I don't think so. I've never violated the sacred dietary laws." God said, "Hey, nothing I make is unclean." Here's how pigs in a blanket saved the world. Right after that dream, three men – Gentiles - knocked on the door – they, too, have had a vision, and they were told to seek out one Simon named Peter who holds a message that will lead their whole household to salvation. Peter's queasiness at the sight of those unclean gentiles probably matched his queasiness at the sight of gentile foods, but God's Spirit orders Peter to go with them, "making no distinction."

While they are together, the Holy Spirit falls upon them, everybody is embraced in the inclusive love of God that opens its arms to EVERYONE! And Peter says something really radical in 10:34! "I realize that God does not play favorites. God loves all his children all over the world – you see what those pigs in a blanket told Peter? That stuff about favorites? Hogwash! God loves everybody. Take the message of salvation to the whole world! Holy Cow! And, Simon Peter is pumped. He has had this epiphany. He is feeling so good. The Spirit has come, and it is bigger than he ever thought. Yes, he has to rethink things, but with the Holy Spirit, he changes. He carries God's mission over boundaries he never would have crossed. He heads back to Jerusalem with all this energy, and boy, is he in trouble. Peter, you got some 'splainin' to do – there was a called board meeting.

The church board said to Peter, "You ate with them! What were you thinking? You had the nerve to BAPTIZE them? That is a slap in our face. How could you eat their food? What is the matter with you? How dare you violate the boundaries established by our sacred tradition?"

This is not so far-fetched. I remember well the first time I presided at the communion table. I was excited – it was a big deal, and I made the statement then that I make now. ALL are invited to God's table. After the service, someone asked, "What do you mean ALL?" It hurt my feelings as I got my first taste of just how threatening the grace of God is. The very second that we say ALL, we have to look at ourselves. We have to think – who would I keep away if I had my druthers? If it were up to me, who would I lock out? In my opinion, who is not spiritually mature enough to be here? If I could pick one person to bar from this table, who would it be?

Didn't somebody just come to your mind? We can't act like the Holy Spirit has power in those people. You don't really mean all, do you? What if they bring something weird to the potluck? For the good of the church, the sanctity of our group, we cannot mean all.

It should not surprise us that Peter ran into resistance; because Jesus ran into resistance everywhere he went. Jewish people couldn't believe God could love Samaritan people. The disciples couldn't believe God could value women. And the righteous couldn't understand why Jesus would touch the unclean...or eat with tax collectors...and prostitutes...and sinners. Why

are we that way? The most important thing you can understand about God –and the hardest thing- is the love God has for all God’s children – for you and for everybody else. And an important thing you need to know about yourself is that the most basic sign of sin in our lives is our resistance to the fact of God’s love for everyone.

A teacher of mine from way back, Dr. Ken Sanchagrin, is a blogger. And, as a sociologist and a Christian, he makes challenging observations. He blogged about a hot potato issue in Christianity that made it to the Washington Post which generated a ton of reader comments left on its website. Dr. Sanchagrin said that “if anyone reads the reader "Comments" following the article one will discover that the majority were made were from so-called "Christians." I say from so-called Christians because the comments were so vitriolic and hate filled. It was as if these people's "God" was only a God of vengeance and that they were sent by God to separate the "sheep from the goats." No Christian has the right to speak so hatefully... is it any wonder that so many people distrust, blow off and hate the Christian message in light of how "Christianity" and "Christians have treated them?"

That is a danger to hardcore believing. It’s not just that Peter’s good religious beliefs cast aspersions on pork; his good religious beliefs cast OUT other human beings – like the Christian remarks at the Washington Post. Believing in something is fine. Believing in tradition is fine...until those beliefs cause us to divide ourselves one from the other. When they split the world into camps of right and wrong, saved and unsaved, accepted and unacceptable, clean and unclean, pigs in a blanket and peanut butter, and provide religious justification for mean behavior, they need to change. Is that what Easter is about – turning people against each other?

Or is Easter more than that? How can we claim an Easter faith that really matters? How can we claim the power of the resurrection and use it to bring people together? How can we find a faith like the faith Peter found? Well, Peter would tell us this: I had this vision, and it was amazing. What we need to do is stick with Jesus, stick with his mission, and invite everybody to the potluck. That’s what he told the board. And, guess what? That church board that called him to task not only listened to Peter – and this is miraculous indeed, they were silenced until they just HAD to praise God for loving a brand new group of people.

Today, on this fifth Sunday of Easter, who the heck cares what you think about theology? What matters is that Jesus is here. He is God’s love letter to the world, and by his death we have ALL been forgiven, and are ALL welcomed into the family of God. So, you either share in the church’s potluck with its pigs in a blanket, or you don’t share in the body of Christ at all. Easter is not about what you believe. Easter is about who you include. And, really, who you include is the strongest evidence of what you truly believe!