

The Risen Lord is Bringing You Together
Acts 10:44-48
June 20, 2010
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The hotels and casinos of Las Vegas make the city of Oz look like a farmhouse in Kansas. When Karen and I vacationed there recently, we walked around like country bumpkins on their first trip to the big city. The most memorable structure we entered, however, was not a palace on the Las Vegas strip, it was a combination gas station, convenience mart, liquor store, casino and diner stationed literally in the middle of nowhere, one hour north of the glitzy city.

I saw the lonely outpost as we drove to the Valley of Fire state park and determined to stop there for lunch on our way back to town, which we did. We went up to the counter of the diner and sat down. A large man, I later identified as the cook, sat cross-armed in back of the cash register. There was not another soul in the café, yet he did not bother to even acknowledge we were there. I thought for a moment that I had made a mistake, but then a young woman came out from the back and took our order. The man behind the cash register seemed bothered by her action, he let out a sigh and went into the kitchen. I ordered a club sandwich and Karen said she'd have the same to which the woman replied, "you don't want two, their gigantic, one will do you both, you can split it." Then she put our order on the little carousel in the window between the counter and the kitchen and disappeared.

Another couple came in. The cook grumpily came back out and sat behind the cash register. The woman of the couple approached the cook and said she wanted a salad. Then she asked, "Do you make your own dressing?" Now remember we are sitting between stacks of Jim Beam and Quaker State and this customer wanted to know if the cook made his own salad dressing. He irritably replied, "Lady, some days I can't even lettuce out here, no I don't make the dressing." Tension arose and the couple took their seats at a table instead of the counter.

Another couple entered and sat at a table. The cook was back in the kitchen, the woman who had taken our order had disappeared and the creaky operation of the diner rusted to a standstill. And then she appeared. A middle-aged woman came in from somewhere and started things moving again. The cook asked her where she'd been. She replied that she purposely let the younger woman take a couple of orders because she knew she needed gas money. The younger woman reentered and said, "actually I needed money to do laundry." The cook harumphed.

Country music kicked onto the radio and one of the couples asked the waitress to change the station. "Honey, I would," she said, "but that's the only station we get out here." Then the waitress started singing along with Willie Nelson, "you were always on my mind" and the grouchy cook joined in and the picky customers sang along. The cook whistled to let the waitress know an order was up; she responded with a bawdy joke that I cannot repeat and everyone in the place laughed out loud. Moving among us like a weaver of hearts, that waitress somehow took a group of six strangers from vastly different walks of life and a young woman too poor to do her laundry and a grouching cook and fashioned a community. It was one of the greatest miracles I've ever witnessed.

Every day we are confronted with people who are as different from us as Paris Hilton is from Mother Teresa. We can pursue two strategies to deal with the diversity of our world. One is to try to build a fortress around our lives that includes only those with whom we feel we have commonality and excludes those who seem too different. We can gate our community, cloister our children in schools where everyone looks like us, join clubs that cater to our kind, run in carefully selected groups of friends and worship where people are asked to conform to a clearly dictated code of behavior and doctrinal statement.

Or we can try to weave connections between ourselves and those who think, look, act and believe differently than we do. If we choose the fortress strategy, we will ultimately fail. The complex diversity of the world as well as the multi-layered fabric of our own community, will simply not allow folks to quarantine themselves from others. A more profound reason the fortress approach won't work, however, is because it flies in the face of what God is doing in this world. God continually works to weave people together, not insulate them from one another.

That truth is unmistakable in today's passage from Acts. We have two men who couldn't be more different. Cornelius is a Roman centurion in charge of one hundred soldiers. He has been stationed in Caesarea by the sea to enforce the rules of the Emperor on the Jews living in that beautiful city. He is wealthy enough to have several servants. He is a gentile.

Peter is a Jew who is living off the good graces of a Jewish man by the name of Simon, in Joppa, a city thirty miles south of Caesarea. He is too poor to own his own home. He is living with a man who preserves animal hides, an occupation that was belittled by the Romans and despised by the Jews. He probably is illiterate.

Both men had been raised with the fortress mentality. Cornelius had been trained to see Jews as rabble rousers who needed constant management and containment. Peter was instructed to see gentiles as unclean people under the condemnation of God. The two men would naturally have stayed as far from one another as possible.

Yet God brought the two together. The Weaver of souls sent a vision to Cornelius telling him to send for Peter. At nearly the same time, God put Peter into a trance and told him that he was no longer to view any person as unclean. Then the Risen Lord told Peter to go with the men who were at that moment arriving at his door. Peter obeyed and went to Cornelius' home where he told the centurion and his entire household about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Then he invited Cornelius to repent of his sins and follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. While he was still sharing the Gospel with the Roman household, the Holy Spirit descended upon Cornelius and his friends and family and they became believers in the risen Lord. As Peter saw the evidence that God had accepted them, he asked, "does anyone know of any reason that would hinder me from baptizing these folks?" Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles in the room could think of any hindrance and so they were baptized into the faith and Peter and Cornelius, two men as different as Billy Graham and Bill the Kid, became brothers in Christ.

I wonder if Peter ever suffered from survivor's guilt. Some Jews who survived the holocaust, some Rwandans who survived the genocide, some soldiers who lived through massacres, some passengers who survived car crashes feel guilty for surviving when their comrades or family members did not. Jesus had been crucified for his radical faith in God, yet Peter buckled to the pressure of a house servant and lived on. Judas took his own life in response to his betrayal of Christ, while Peter had a little talk with Jesus and lived on. Stephen had been stoned to death for his fearless faith, yet Peter kept a slightly lower profile and lived on. Did he ever wonder if he had failed God in some way simply by living? If so, I trust the Spirit coaxed him out of those thoughts. Eventually Peter died a martyr's death, but God needed him to build some bridges on earth before crossing over into heaven.

Sometimes, people of my generation feel guilty that they were not more directly involved in the equal rights movement for women or the civil rights movement for people of color. Our parents were not even a gleam in our grandparents eyes when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony fought to eventually see the 19th Amendment turned in to law. Our generation was in kindergarten when Esther Peterson and Eleanor Roosevelt worked to get the Equal Pay Act of 1963 enacted to require equal pay for men and women who do the same job. We were in elementary school when Dr. King was killed. Most of us have never marched or protested or sacrificed to participate in any of the great movements for equality that have created a more just society.

Yet we still have a role to play in God's great work of weaving people together. Our specific assignments vary from person to person. We find them just like Cornelius and Peter identified their roles. Notice that both men

were praying, when God directed them to get together. Part of our daily prayers should include a request for God to show us how we too can make a contribution to God's great act of weaving souls together.

After praying and receiving the guidance of God, both men had to move out of their comfort zones to encounter people different from themselves. This seems to be the role most of us are asked to play today. We are called to be more than just a little better than the generations that preceded us when it comes to breaking down the hostilities that divide people today. The fact that we try to avoid racist speech and treating women as if they were inferior, the fact that we accept folks of races other than our own into our neighborhoods makes us slightly more enlightened than some of the folks who raised us but it doesn't fulfill our obligation before God.

To do that, we have to intentionally continue the work of the Weaver and this church provides us a perfect venue to do just that. I get to hear all the complaints of the church. Many people complain that most of our members don't attend business meetings. To them, this absence reflects a lack of commitment to the church. Another subset grieve over that fact that so many folks don't attend Sunday School or the Wednesday Bible Study or prayer meeting. How can anyone be serious about their faith," they ask, "if they don't participate in Sunday School or prayer meeting?" Still others notice that some members never attend any event that is planned to celebrate the African or African American traditions of our members. Others gripe that so few support our choir when they prepare special music or come out for our children when they offer the Christmas pageant. Many members have been disappointed that more folks don't show up for the testimony services we have around Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. Many times our schedules simply do not permit us to attend everything we would like to support. Nevertheless, the dominant answer that everyone gives to those complaints is something like, "I attend those things that interest me or that I enjoy or that I have family members involved in." Okay, I get that, it is just my duty to point out to one and all, in order to allow the Weaver to bring us together as God intends, we each have to move outside our comfort zones to honor our brothers and sisters who are different from us. The gospel music folks have to support the choir when they sing the Requiems they don't quite get. People without children in the home need to be there when other folks' children tell the story of Christ's birth. White folks need to honor our members of color by celebrating their traditions as they celebrate ours. All God's people need to be in Bible Study, prayer meeting and business sessions to honor one another's concerns and grow in the oneness of the spirit. It's not easy for anyone. No easier than it was for Cornelius and Peter to follow God out of their own comfort zones.

We are not responsible for being Martin Luther Kings Jrs. or Mother Therasas or Susan B. Anthonys. We are responsible for taking the steps God calls our generation to take in order to continue the wondrous work of soul-weaving that God has been doing since the beginning of time.

On the second Sunday in May, the Washington Post Magazine ran a wonderful story about the life of Elfrieda Hendrix. Ms. Hendrix ran the first class for talented and gifted students ever formed in the United States. She was a single mother of a teenaged boy when she invented a whole new way of educating children who were a step or two ahead academically. Her students were so thrilled with her methodologies, that she attempted to bring some of those experiences to her own son, but, being a teenager and all, he ignored all his mother's attempts. In fact he resented all the time his mother spent preparing her lessons as well as the relationship she seemed to have with her students.

After only one year of teaching the class, Ms. Hendrix died of cancer. Thirty-four years after her death, one of her students tracked down Ms Hendrix's son to tell him how his mother had changed his life. The son, now in his mid-forties was amazed that his mother had been so instrumental in this stranger's life. The discovery inspired the son to find out how the rest of his mother's students had fared in life and if they remembered her at all. To his amazement, 19 of her 21 students responded to his inquiries to explain that Ms. Hendrix had not only been the best teacher they had ever had, she had been the primary influence in helping them believe they could be actors, lawyers, doctors, politicians, scientists and successes in many other fields.

The son wrote at the end of the article, "I'm not jealous of that class anymore. After talking to a bunch of kids who were also crazy about my mother, I understand more what a genius she had for seeing into the soul of a child. And I know how clearly she must have seen into mine." The grown son realized that he had something in common with these 19 strangers. They had all been loved by the same woman and loved that same woman in return.

That is how the Weaver brings us together today. As we meet one another, study the Scriptures together, encourage one another's kids, pray for one another, honor one another's traditions, we learn that we have all been loved by the same God and that we all love that same God in return. The fortresses come down and the Weaver continues to bring us together.