

Step by Step *Acts 11:1-18*

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Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision." Acts 11:4-5

In October of 1908 a sixteen-year-old white girl was assaulted in a cotton field just off South Spring Street in Concord, North Carolina. A black man was arrested for the crime and jailed in Raleigh at the state penitentiary to protect him from a lynch mob. Justice (or what was called that) was rather swift in those days. By mid-December a strong wooden scaffold was erected and on the eighteenth day of that month, just two months after the arrest, the young thirty-six-year-old sheriff of Cabarrus County presided over the last legal hanging in the state of North Carolina.

The sheriff was a towering man, 6 feet, 7 inches, a Lutheran, as were ninety percent of all county residents in 1908. The sheriff, widely-respected in Concord, was personally opposed to the death penalty. Maybe something he heard in his Lutheran church or read in the Bible shaped his thinking. His wife, Agnes, had the unhappy task of making the hood used at the hanging. December eighteenth arrived, a chilly day on the cusp of winter. Upwards of two thousand people filled the public square in the vicinity of the jail to see justice served (or some version of it); vengeance meted out; the streets now made safe—something. Crowds have always gathered at such events like vultures circling carrion.

The Cabarrus County sheriff who presided over the hanging that day was Frank Honeycutt, my great-grandfather, for whom I am named. I do not know the name of the black man, which is telling. I do know (according to my mother who has researched details of the trial) that there is almost a one-hundred percent chance that this man was innocent.

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"Why were you eating with *them*?" ask the elders at First Jerusalem Church when Peter returns from his little junket to Joppa by the sea. That little geographical reference should make us pause a bit. Do you recall another Bible story where Joppa figures prominently? Joppa is mentioned in the Book of Jonah. And Jonah is about a prophet of God who slowly learns that God's love is much wider than he once thought. We tend to remember the incident of the whale and the prophet's time in the belly of that beast, but those three days in the dark amidst digestive juices and carcasses of various sea creatures were just props to get the prophet's attention. God wanted Jonah to go into a city, Nineveh, and tell those Ninevites that God loved *them* as much as God loved Jonah's relatives. And that mission, as you may recall, was a huge stretch for Jonah. The love of God was wider than he wanted it to be. Jonah didn't do handstands on the way to the city. He went slowly step-by-step, slowly waking up to this wider love of God.

So it's rather remarkable that Peter's vision in Acts occurs in Joppa. I think of

William Faulkner's famous quote here: "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past." Something was revealed to Peter in Joppa that was also revealed to Jonah. You know, people of faith spend a lot of time breathlessly trying to keep up with God who is out ahead of us, far out ahead of us, beckoning us to places we should go, people we should include. But something gets in the way.

"So why were you eating with *them*?" ask the church elders. A Gentile outsider, the soldier Cornelius, had been baptized. Highly irregular—not one of them; Peter knew he would have some explaining to do. His colleagues in Jerusalem were rather irked and critical of his actions. Peter was in hot water to say the least.

Let me stop here and say something that might seem obvious: When you're doing the work of Christ, sharing the radical love of God, loving "as" Jesus loved (from our gospel reading), then you might very well receive a lot of criticism for it. Does that also mean that if you never receive *any* criticism in your life as a Christian, you might be playing it a little safe? Well, possibly. Maybe that's what Jesus meant when he said, "Woe to those of whom all speak well." If we follow Jesus and never ever make anybody mad, I might have to wonder about our Christianity. Jesus constantly angered folk. He was not afraid of conflict, divisive sometimes, confrontational for the sake of the kingdom. We need to move beyond the fallacy that the church exists to make everyone happy. When we radically extend the love of God to all people, that's going to inevitably make some angry.

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"So why'd you have to go and eat with *them*? They're not our kind, don't look like us. What are you doing, Peter?" Oh, they were hot.

So, "step by step" says the story, Peter begins. "I was in the city of Joppa praying." If you have no interest at all in change, please avoid prayer. Fill your day with busy tasks and television. If you like things the way they are, I advise you to leave prayer out of your life entirely. Prayer is one way God changes the world. Peter's vision occurred in the middle of his prayers.

I visited Nola Lucius this past Thursday at the Lowman Home. Nola will be ninety-nine in July. She misses this congregation desperately; even though her memory is not what it once was, she named several of you and wanted me to tell you all hello, sending her love. In our conversation, I was reminded that Nola still spends an hour each day on her knees—on her almost 99-year-old knees—in prayer to her Lord. This is a practice she has carried with her for decades since she was a nurse at the State Hospital and through the illness of her husband whom she largely cared for at home until he died. What a laugh this woman has, which rises and falls like a flute. What joy. "You know, sometimes people today don't want to talk about Jesus," she said. "And that's okay. So we talk about other things. But I can still pray. And I do."

Prayer is one way God gets at us. If you have no interest in change, hear this: Avoid prayer intentionally. All the great movements of change in our world, I daresay, began with a vision that was born in prayer. And step-by-step, at lunch counters, in public schools, in voting booths, in courts of law, (and even in churches!) that vision became reality.

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Why'd you have to go and eat with them? "I was praying. I was in a trance. I saw a

vision. The Spirit told me.” These are not words that comfort most Lutherans, even though Martin Luther employed them all as he went about helping to change the world. Peter sees an incredible variety of animals in that sheet (something that contradicted his biblical viewpoint), and even though the command was initially dietary in nature, the vision would come to embody the very gospel for him.

He looked at those angry churchgoers, his friends, and said, “The Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning....Who was I that I could hinder God?”

There is a huge tug, people of God, for human beings to categorize and separate and codify. Human history is full of this: black and white, gay and straight, North and South, Protestant and Catholic, public and private, contemporary and traditional, homeless and employed. We could go on and on.

But sometimes we’re given a vision as Christians where labels vanish and a whole roiling ark of creation rubs shoulders in the same heavenly bedsheet called baptism. Note the variety in that sheet today. And note the possibility of tension and locking of horns between the different types descending from heaven. It took three separate sightings of this odd vision, but the message is clear to Peter as he explains, step-by-step, to his astonished partners in the gospel: “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make distinctions between them and us.” It was the end of “them” and “us.”

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A lot has changed in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, since 1908. More than one hundred years have passed. Racism (and all the other ugly –isms) are still part of our world, but a lot has changed. Step by step.

Remember these three words that connect you as God’s person to a mission that strives to eliminate distinctions between people:

Joppa.
Prayer.
Baptism.

Words that form us, invite us to take that next step.