

*MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cvasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
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Acts 11:1-18

DANGEROUS DREAM

After the state of Arizona passed a mean (some would say immoral) new immigration law that will allow anyone to be pulled over for “driving while brown,” Oklahoma has promised to not only match it, but make it even meaner. In a country that can’t pass comprehensive immigration reform for fear of what would happen to our economy without undocumented cheap labor, we have once again turned to fear and intimidation of the stranger to show how law-abiding and Christian we are.

But if we took our faith seriously we would have to admit that to persecute and make a scapegoat of the stranger is the opposite of our biblical mandate to welcome the foreigner and show hospitality to those who are aliens among us. The Jews were told never to forget that they too were resident aliens in Egypt and that they should never wrong or oppress a resident alien. As for Jesus — his whole ministry was about extending the range of God’s love and compassion far beyond the narrow confines of race and class.

Take a look at Chris Moore’s latest blog on our church website and you’ll see why this is sheer hypocrisy. We were once all strangers in a strange land, and the story of Jesus is the story of refugee parents on the run without a place to lay their heads. Chris writes: “It is a good thing they didn’t have to flee to Arizona; they might not have had their papers with them and the story of Jesus could have ended a lot differently. We do a good job of highlighting the five or so passages which are supposedly about homosexuality, but we have a harder time hearing about how we are supposed to treat the stranger among us or the exploitative use of money.

Perhaps the real threat is what I would call the “browning of America.” Those of us who are of white, European descent will be in the minority in this country by 2050, and that’s when we had better hope that as the new minority, we are treated better than we treated others when we were in the majority. Jesus tells us that the way we treat the stranger in need is the way we treat

him. Why then are we so into cracking down on people and shaming them?

Two new anti-abortion laws out of Oklahoma made national news, a bill to require that a doctor show the pregnant mother an ultrasound image of her fetus, and one that frees a doctor from liability if he chooses not to tell the mother the truth about possible birth defects in her unborn child. These after a new law that requires detailed information about the woman be posted on a public website. These laws don't do anything to protect rights or advance morality; these are meant to shame women, already facing an agonizing decision, and in the case of immunity for doctors who withhold information about the fetus, this law protects a doctor who lies to a patient by withholding vital information. How's that for family values?

All of this is part of a downward spiral with respect to the other — those who do not hold the view of the majority (a white male conservative Christian view) in any corner of our social and political landscape. A church member working with me at the Christmas in April house yesterday put it best. The new law in Arizona should include, he said, a clause that the police who stop someone for looking like an illegal alien must also speak in a German accent: Something like: “ver ist your papers.”

It would be wise to remember as we sit here in church that in the beginning of our radical movement, The Way, as it was called, did something unheard of with regard to the other. It did not just decide to put up with the other, but embrace the other as an equal, not after the other converted or got circumcised or stopped eating pork or learned to speak Hebrew, but as they were — with or without their papers.

And nowhere is this more vividly recorded in the New Testament than in Acts 11, when Peter recounts his vivid, life-changing dream to a church struggling to understand how followers of Jesus are supposed to be different in the world. It is the most dramatic of the stories about the gospel of inclusion, about the fact that what characterized the Jesus Movement from the beginning was that we are all invited to join – meaning, all of us who are not Jewish. And don't forget, that's us — that's you and me baby. We are the Gentiles. How is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to deal with those who are driving while Gentile?

This dream is so intense and remarkable that if we translated it into contemporary metaphors you can bet that it would involve our treatment of Muslims or atheists or gays and lesbians (or in Oklahoma, public school teachers). It might begin: “After a long day of campaigning for the Tea Party, Dr. Tom Coburn fell into a deep fitful sleep, and he dreamed that he saw a sheet lowered down and in it were all manner of dark-skinned uninsured people who loved Obama but did not speak English. And God said, “Treat them” — they are my children. I mean we've got to make this real.

Otherwise someone will pass it off as just an old Bible story. It's an old Bible story alright, and one that the Oklahoma Legislature might one to consider exempting from the curriculum of the new Bible in the Schools Program. If we're worried about Huckleberry Finn, this should be kept far away from young readers.

Peter is on the road. He is "touring", if you will, with the disciples and they are a band, if you will, under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It's very heady stuff of course, being part of something new and pushing back against the Empire. He's come to a place called Joppa, a bustling seaport that is absolutely crawling with Gentiles (I use the word "crawling" for a good reason, which we'll come back to).

He is staying in the house of someone called Simon the Tanner. They call him a tanner because he cleans and skins animal hides for a living. His house is also his place of business, so the place is wallpapered with animal hides, including those that any good Jew would consider "unclean."

At noon, which is prayer time, Peter decides to take a nap on the roof of Simon's house. He is hungry, but the uncleanness of his surroundings make him restless, and he drifts off into a fitful sleep—like a socialite from Nichols Hills might experience after she has run out of gas on the south side and hits the lock buttons on her Mercedes when she realizes that where she is surrounded by brown. Let's do this. Let's go there, to Simon's house, as if we were Peter. We can do it, if we use God's most wonderful gift to us: our imagination.

First of all, from downstairs he can smell food cooking, and that reminds him that he is hungry. But perhaps he has gone up on the roof to get away, to escape his discomfort, because "up on the roof" to quote that old James Taylor song is where everything looks different and we can escape the cares of the world.

But Peter cannot escape the fact that he is surrounded by contamination. Simon's house is a cross between a taxidermist and an embalmer, and the place stinks to high heaven. Oh, sure, Peter knows intellectually that he is a new creation in Christ, but when the nostrils are involved, we revert very quickly to our childhood table. *I'm supposed to eat at the table of a man whose hands are permanently stained with tanning acid? A man who doesn't know Adoni from Elohim? A man who hasn't once celebrated Passover and probably doesn't even know that God is really Jewish and rocks against the Wailing Wall of Heaven when he prays?* If it helps, imagine if, during the 60's, a Ku Klux Klansman found himself in the basement of a black church eating fried chicken.

In this highly improbably setting, Peter stretches out on the roof to take a nap, and probably wonders just how he got there, and what God could possibly have in mind for him. He must be thinking, “I could be home right now, with family and friends, (and all the other chosen folk, my people not ‘you people’)--eating kosher.”

But no. Now I’m “Petros,” the rock upon which Jesus said he would build his kingdom, the keys to which he left to me. They are jingling in my pocket come to think of it. Why me? Why’d I did get this assignment, and where are the rest of the boys? Maybe I could just hand over my set of keys to one of them, and then get my old life back. I miss my old life sometimes, fishing, mending nets, hating Gentiles. Besides, I’m hungry, and I need to eat, but oh Lord, please – not at that table!

I see Peter mumbling and thrashing about, twitching as he falls asleep, not deep sleep, but dream sleep. REM sleep, we call it, and all of a sudden he is dreaming the most vivid, life-changing dream of his life. A vision so powerful that we are still talking about it on 63rd St a block west of Portland on a spring morning where the wind comes sweeping down the plains.

Peter went up on the roof, but we avoid Gentiles of all sorts by living in walled neighborhoods and passing restrictive covenants that will keep out the riffraff. We also move through a world of pain and inequity behind tinted glass. The only illegal aliens some of us see are the ones who are mowing our lawn and blowing the leaves into the neighbor’s yard.

And it’s not because we are bad people. It’s because we are afraid. The other day, I took Cass to see one of his friends from Westminster School, and this house was well protected by a wall and a guard house (and I think a mote with a few alligators) and as we arrived at the guard house, this very pleasant black man checked us in. First of all, isn’t it strange to have an African American posted at the gate of an all-white enclave? A gentile to keep out the gentiles?

He asked us where we were going, and we told him to visit so and so (they must remain anonymous, because it could be any one of you), and then he asked, “and what is the purpose of your visit?” I said, “my kid wants to play with one of their kids.” And that answer, and the obvious sarcasm of it did not sit well with this man, who was only doing his job, of course. And so he phoned up the house, and when the woman of the house answered, he said, “are you expecting anyone from the Meyers’ family?”

We got in. Better yet, we got out. Maybe that’s what people really mean when they say, “You should get out more!”

Peter falls asleep and in that permeable state between the conscious and the unconscious

that we call dreaming, he sees a large sheet, like a big picnic blanket, bulging with beasts, reptiles, and fowl, lowered down out of the sky, and the voice of the Lord saying, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat. Here is your lunch.”

But Peter says, disgusted, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” Then a second time, the voice commands Peter to partake of this bizarre cornucopia. “No thanks, Lord, you know I can’t eat that kind of meat.” And then God says something so radical that you’d think God said it: *What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*

Now for the third time, the voice commands Peter to rise and eat. This is Simon Bar-jona we’re talking about here, the impetuous one, and he is frustrated. No, No, No! Three times he is commanded, three times he refuses (Peter does everything in threes): “Peter I go to Jerusalem to die. . .no, no, no Lord! . . .Peter, this night you will deny me three times. . .no, no, no Lord! . . .three times by the lake after fishing all night, the Lord says to him, “Do you love me? . . .then feed my sheep” . . .and now three times, Peter, rise, kill, eat. . .no, no, no Lord!”).

After he wakes up and tries to shake off this amazing dream, the men sent by Cornelius arrive, looking for the great missionary apostle. He is told by the spirit that, get this, *three* men are looking for him, and he goes downstairs to greet them. Notice what the text says. *The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.* That means, no driving while Gentile.

Cornelius has had his own dream (it must have been a full moon), and in it he has been told to seek out Peter, and bring him to his house. So Peter, still blinking and trying to shake off his own dream invites him to stay. The next day, he goes with the whole entourage to the house of Cornelius, and on seeing Peter, the centurion falls to his knees to worship him. Peter says, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.”

Then he notices that a large crowd has gathered, and being a preacher does what any preacher would do upon seeing a big crowd – he starts preaching. He reminds everyone that it is *unlawful* for a Jew to visit or associate with a Gentile.

But now, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Cornelius meanwhile, said, in effect, “That’s funny . . . I too had a dream in which I was commanded to send for you.” Now think of this . . . a good Gentile and a good Jew who is now a good Christian Jew all together under one roof, where none of us are supposed to be.

“That’s nothing,” Peter must have said, “I’ve been dining at the home of Simon the Tanner

– that is, when I could work up an appetite!” What’s happening to these guys? I mean, this is insanity. This is centuries of social custom and religious doctrine being thrown out the window. All these people together who just don’t “belong” together, like mongrels at a Pedigree dog show.

It’s no wonder the early church called the spirit a mighty wind – a tornado is more like it, flattening the houses of division, while up from the splintered remains crawl people who are singing and embracing one another, and seem possessed of what Alice Walker called the Secret of Joy.

And then the next day, after a big crowd has gathered, he says to Peter: “Preach to us.” And that’s when he says it. I’m not kidding, it’s right there in the Bible. He says something that to this day would blow away every neo-Nazi, every hate monger, every ditto-head, every racist, every frightened, white-supremacist, gun-toting, woman-hating, homophobic, make-believe Christian in the land.

So if you are listening to this sermon by radio, and you still believe that God has a favorite nation, or a favorite race, or a favorite religion, or if you think in war all that really matters is the number of American casualties, I offer you the words of Simon Peter, the rock, the one they named that little basilica in Rome after. Listen, and then try to understand what this really means:

“I truly understand that God shows *no partiality*, but in every nation *anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

How do you know that Peter? The crowd wants to know. His answer: I know this because I *know* Jesus. What do you mean you *know* Jesus? You mean you *knew* Jesus. Isn’t he dead?

Not to us he isn’t. And so he tells them. He tells them about Jesus. And the story goes that people were so astonished at the way the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, and so many people wanted to get baptized that they had to run out and get more water.

Peter had what Native Americans call a Big Dream. I prefer smaller dreams myself, more manageable ones. Like, dreaming of Jeannie, or dreaming of a white Christmas. Because this dream of Peter’s marked him off for death, and marks the rest of us off from our own nation, our own culture, our own Empire. I think we should just shake it off, call it a bad dream. Or say, “Dream on.”

Just think for a moment what would have happened if Peter had done that. Refused the

dream. Decided to stay in his Jewish room, call for kosher room service, pop something in the micro, or just eat in the kitchen alone. But the Lord said, “Don’t turn your nose up at my creation.” Well that’s a paraphrase, but I like it! I wonder what’s going to happen in Arizona when a police officer, acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit, turns in his badge and says, “I won’t do this anymore.”

That’s why the church of the future must become again less like a sterile operating room, scrubbed and sanitized for elective surgery, and more like a MASH unit where mangled bodies of injured humans are rolled in for emergency treatment.

For now have the heavens been opened to all of us. Or as the 148th Psalm puts it, when all the earth and all created things shall praise the Lord. . . angels, sun and moon, sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, kings and peoples.

Now does salvation occur in all times and in all places through the Holy Spirits’ direction, and today is offered to one and all.

If we believe this, it’s hard to know whether we should be jumping for joy, or running for cover. But this much is certain. When that police officer turns in his badge, the first community to embrace him, care for him, and sing hymns of joy to welcome him should be the church of Jesus Christ.

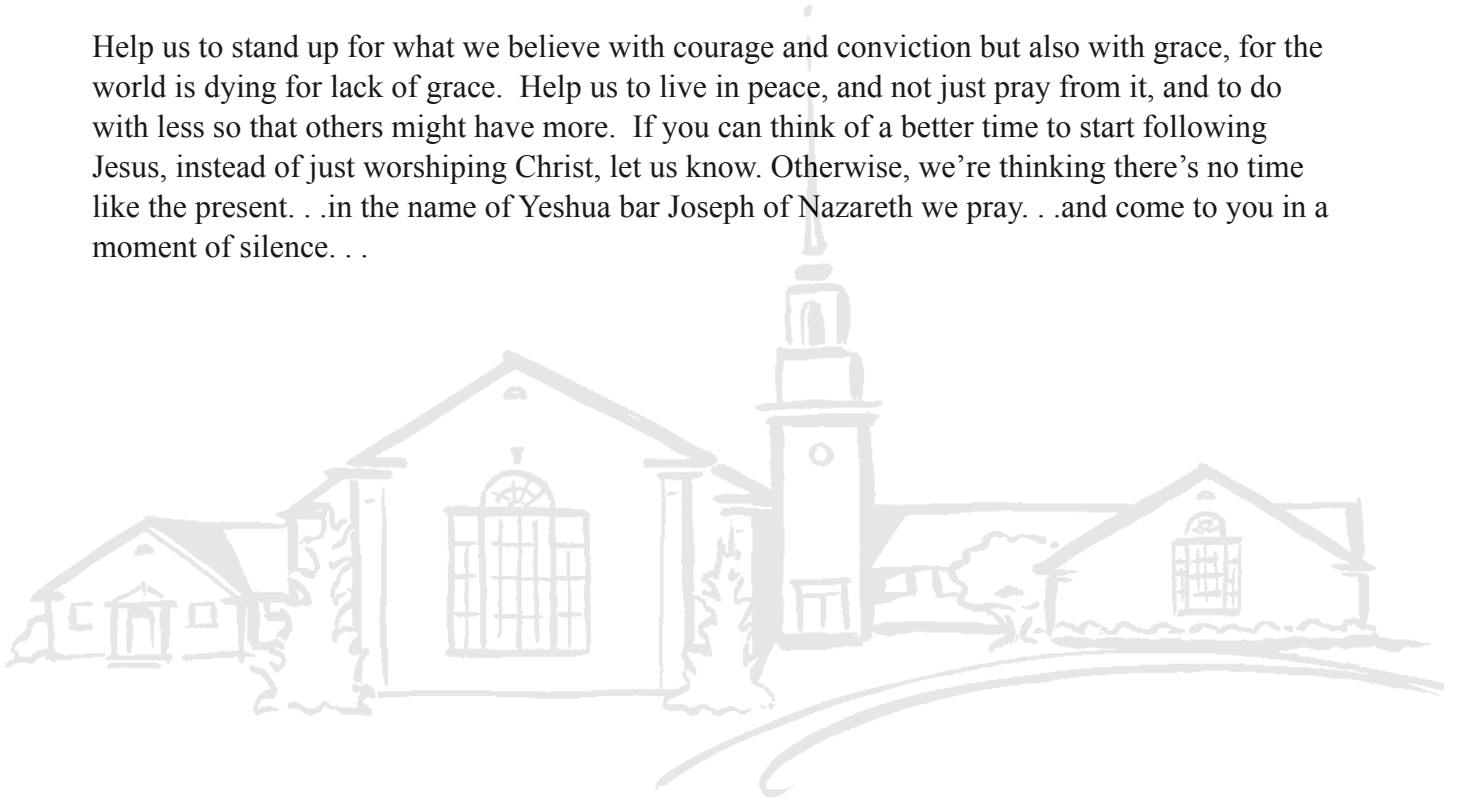
At the gates of heaven, the guard will phone in to ask God, “Are you expecting anyone from Oklahoma?” I imagine God saying, “Well, to be honest, I’m not sure you’re going to like it here. Lot of brown kids. But I’ll put you in line behind Arizona. They still think this is a country club, but told he them, “Dream On.”

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, May 2, 2010

Lord of Life, we come to you, as we have so many times, in the quiet splendor of this room. We

come to sing, and to pray, and to listen for that “still small voice” that would lead us to a place we could never get to all by ourselves. There are wars that need to be stopped, and strangers among us who need to be welcomed, not harassed. Don’t give up on us.

Help us to stand up for what we believe with courage and conviction but also with grace, for the world is dying for lack of grace. Help us to live in peace, and not just pray from it, and to do with less so that others might have more. If you can think of a better time to start following Jesus, instead of just worshipping Christ, let us know. Otherwise, we’re thinking there’s no time like the present. . .in the name of Yeshua bar Joseph of Nazareth we pray. . .and come to you in a moment of silence. . .



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