

“New Things Can Happen”
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6 John 13:31-35
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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A couple of days ago Kelly Mudoch-Kitt came to my office to discuss plans for her wedding in June. She paused at my door, pointed to a picture there and said, “Oh, that is so sweet.” She’d noticed one of my favorite pictures – a drawing I’ve had taped to the doors of two different offices now – for a total of six years. My daughter Deborah made it when she was five years old and I was starting a job at a church in Atlanta. It’s a picture of me in front of the church, and the note above the picture says, “Dear Mom, I hope you have a nice time at your church. New things can happen every day.” That’s pretty great, right? To top it off, Deborah had drawn a little Easter egg in the corner of the picture. It was November, mind you; there were no other Easter eggs in sight. So to me this was just a stunning display of symbolic awareness, even for a pastor’s kid. What represents newness more than Easter? God’s ability to bring life from death. Salvation via crucifixion. Indeed. “New things can happen every day.”

That’s easy to believe this time of year, and cheerful, too. With baby birds hatching from their eggs, the trees leafing out, and the flowers in bloom, we see new things happening all around. And they’re marvelous things – sometimes more amazing than we recall. Consider the miracle of a seed breaking open . . . nourished by water and dirt and sun it changes from a tiny seed into a flower, then a squash. Sauté it up in a bit of butter made from milk drawn from a cow, and it’s supper – from a seed, from a cow. Think of all the little caterpillars, one day inching across the ground, the next day cocooned . . . then flitting through the air – pretty butterflies. New things happen every day.

Of course, the new things we see are not always so immediately delightful. Today’s Easter story from the Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that some new things can scare the pants off you – even when they’re good things – even when they’re *God’s* things.

In this story we have Peter, one of Jesus’ closest friends – a faithful Jew, a willing disciple, a joyous witness to Christ’s resurrection – and God gives him a vision that will turn his world upside down. *Have a nice time at your church, Peter?* Not with *this* new thing. Not yet. Because here’s the deal. Peter lived in a time when, to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ, you had to be a Jew. That’ll seem strange to Christians today, but the early Church grew as a branch within Judaism. Like Peter, all the followers of Jesus were faithful Jews. That means that they observed the Torah – the Jewish law. And *central* to the Torah are all the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, between clean and unclean, between sacred and profane. Those distinctions shaped people’s everyday lives. They determined what you ate, who your friends were, where you got your groceries and clothes, who you married, how you thought about yourself. Keeping

clean and pure and separate was *key*. So when Peter had that dream inviting him to eat – no, *instructing him to eat* food that was *unclean*, it was a traumatic moment.

[Here] the very God who was presumably responsible for having invented these distinctions was commanding [Peter] to ignore them [says Carl Holladay]. Peter is instructed by God, “kill and eat” (v. 7). Even further, Peter is told, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v. 9). Peter is being told that the distinctions he is used to no longer hold. His universe of meaning is being challenged to the core.¹

And that’s even *before* the Spirit introduces Peter to Cornelius – a Roman Centurion, unclean Gentile, enemy of the Jews – who waits for Peter eagerly, wanting to hear about Jesus. When Peter arrives at Cornelius’s house, Cornelius falls to his knees ready to worship, yearning for the waters of baptism. And so, just one day after his revolutionary dream, Peter claims his calling – his brand new thing. Peter takes Cornelius by his *surprisingly clean* hand. Peter sits to supper at the table of this man who is no longer an enemy, but in Christ *a friend*. He eats the meal prepared for him (ham and shellfish, probably – Peter’s first ever). He pours the waters of baptism over Cornelius’ bent head – naming this stranger a brother.

Still, I doubt you could call it “a nice time,” because looming before Peter was the need to explain his actions to the people back home. It is one thing to accept a new thing for yourself, and quite another to explain it to your family. Peter’s willingness to break the rules led to conflict in his community; of course it did. His willingness to reach out to the Gentiles, caused the Jews to back away and criticize Peter. At least initially it did. But then Peter explained what had happened to him – the vision, the voice, his confusion, the Spirit’s clarity – and the Jewish leaders listened to him. With surprisingly open minds, they listened. And in one of the most amazing conversions in the history of Christianity, Peter’s home community came around. They joined Peter to praise God for the new thing God was doing.

Now, there are many things a preacher could say about all this: how God wants for us to welcome all kinds of people – even those we find repulsive at the start . . . how powerful the gospel message is, even to those who are hearing it for the first time . . . how our roots go back to Cornelius; *you and I* are the stranger, the outsider – even more than we know. But what’s intrigued me this week is simply the reminder that God is capable of changing the rules – changing our notions of what we are called to do and how we are called to live. God’s new thing can turn our old things upside down. God’s Spirit can speak fresh and astounding truths. And when that happens, the faithful thing for us to do is to adapt, to follow, to roll with the punches if you will. That requires a measure of openness and bravery and trust. In this, Peter and his community provide good examples.

“Discernment” is still a dirty word around here – thanks to a long, cumbersome, “discernment process” that some members of this church remember with a groan. But I think “discernment” is one of the things we’re talking about here. What I mean by that

¹ Holladay, 250.

is, how can we tell when a new thing is from God? How can we perceive fresh movements of the Spirit?

Again, I think Peter and his community provide some clues for us. Remember the story. Instead of shaking off his vision as too absurd, Peter listened to it. He asked questions about it. He remembered the scriptures – God’s law that pertained to his vision. “No way!” he said at first . . . but he kept on praying. He felt *God* in the vision, so he couldn’t let go of it. Still puzzled, Peter turned to the people around him. He opened his door to the folks who appeared in the right place at the right time. He opened *himself* to the experience that unfolded with them; he was brave to try a radically new thing he believed God might be sending his way. Peter listened, and he spoke. He shared a meal with strangers. He did not withhold the gracious good news he felt God was calling him to share. Then, Peter said it all out loud to the people back home. He explained what he had seen and thought and done step by step. And *they* listened, and they spoke. And then, in the silence that followed, they realized they had reason to rejoice.

It’s not a road map, is it? I would much prefer the clarity of a chart or map. But I think that this story of faithful people who were attuned to the world around them and to the needs and hopes of *people* (like Cornelius) around them, people who were mindful of God’s teachings in the past, but open to new teachings in the future – they’re good guides! They can help us in the work of discernment – the work of seeing what God might be showing us . . . the work of learning what will lead to a greater fullness of life.

Chandler Stokes, a friend from my lectionary study group, is another of my guides. He says that some folks think of the gospel as an anchor for life . . . and of God as our safe harbor. Those stable metaphors can be helpful for some people, and for certain times. But here in Acts – here for Peter and his community – the gospel is more like a keel you sink deep in the water – to steady your boat. And God? God is the wind itself. When that wind begins to blow, new things *can* happen – whether or not we’re expecting them. Whether or not we’re ready. Of course, not all breezes are from God. To know one from another requires discernment. But when the wind of the Spirit starts to blow, what a what a wild and gracious ride it can be, when we dare to raise the sails and embrace the new thing God has in store.