

A woman learned from her doctor that she had AIDS. This was back in 1989, when such a diagnosis was basically a death sentence. Sherry was a member of a prominent family in town. Her husband was an attorney, and they had three children, one of whom was studying art in Europe. The other two were in high school.

AIDS. Stunned by the diagnosis, she tried to figure out what to do. She decided to go first to her priest. He was a good listener, but he was also concerned, because Sherry was a Sunday School teacher. He suggested that she stop teaching, and counseled her not to drink the communion wine from the common cup any longer. He had to look after the whole flock, after all. Sherry left the priest's office and never set foot in that church again. She felt unclean, rejected, unloved.

Her husband was also astounded. “But HOW,” he asked, “how could you have AIDS?” The implications and ramifications overwhelmed him, and he could not find it in himself to support his wife. He himself now had to be tested, and he very well might test positive. How could she do this to him? Once more, instead of love and support, Sherry felt only condemnation and rejection. Unclean.

In anguish, she went to the bank, took out quite a bit of money, and left town. At first she stayed in hotels in various cities, but soon she realized that her money would not last long on such a course. So she searched for boarding houses and single room occupancy establishments. Every now and then Sherry would attend a church, and finally she found a church she liked and kept attending it, but she never stayed for coffee hour and didn't ever leave her address or phone number.

One Sunday the scripture lesson was the same one we heard this morning, about the vision Peter was given and God's challenge to him to reach beyond what was considered acceptable to people his Jewish faith considered totally unclean. The preacher spoke about God's boundaries never being as small as we try to make them. After the worship service, an elderly couple approached Sherry, and invited her to share lunch with them.

What to do? They seemed nice, warm and loving, but she was unclean, no matter what the Bible said about the Holy Spirit working in the lives of folks deemed unacceptable. Still, she was hungry, the people were asking her to eat with them, and her money was in short supply. She accepted.

They took her to their home. They prayed before the meal was shared. As they ate the meal of chicken and vegetables, the elderly woman looked at Sherry for a moment, and then said, “Sherry, my heart has gone out to you since you first walked into our church. After much prayer, I feel led to be totally honest with you. You see, two years ago, our son died of AIDS. Since then, Ralph and I have prayed that God would show us how to help someone else with the disease. Unless I am way off my mark, you have AIDS, and I believe the Lord wants us to work

with you and help you.”

Sherry could not speak, but her tears were met by hugs and love. She moved in with the Bakers, and found in them the steadfast love and support of God. The hand of God had brought forth something new for Sherry and for the Bakers. Through God’s love, all involved received a new kind of home.

In the lesson today from Acts, Peter was criticized by other Christians for visiting and preaching to non-Jewish folks. He had to tell the Jerusalem Christians how God had worked in his own life and in the non-Jewish Cornelius’ life at the same time in order to set things up so that non-Jews might become part of the Gospel story. Peter had learned that God’s ways are ‘way beyond our ways’ (Isaiah 55:8-9) ... God’s plan is much larger than we can ever imagine. Remember the story from Acts 10:

The non-Jew Cornelius was told by God to send servants to fetch Peter from Joppa to Caesarea... As those servants were approaching Joppa, Peter himself was given the vision of the sheet with unclean animals on it, and the voice told him to eat them. Peter was a good Jew, and adamantly replied that he had never eaten anything unclean before... To which God replied with a challenge: “How dare you call unclean what I have made to be clean!”

So Peter went to the Gentile’s home and heard how Cornelius had also been visited by God and told to summon Peter. God’s hand was unmistakable... So Peter preached to those who were at Cornelius’ house, and many were baptized by the Holy Spirit as he preached.. When Peter saw that God’s Holy Spirit was working among those uncircumcised, unbaptized people, Peter realized that he could do nothing except let these non-Jews be baptized in the name of Jesus.

Today’s lesson from the 11th chapter of Acts tells how Peter was “called on the carpet” by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem for having allowed men who had not been circumcised into the Jewish faith to become Christian. In the smaller picture, God’s hand led Peter every step of the way. In the larger picture, through this event, the early church was forced to decide whether or not a person was required to become Jewish before he/she could become Christian. It was decided that God was choosing to work in the lives of Gentiles as well as Jews to bring forth the church of Jesus Christ. That’s why we Christians today do not first have to become Jewish before accepting Jesus as our Savior. Peter and other Christians were able to see that God was doing something new.

The reading from Revelation would have us understand that God’s Creation was not finished in Genesis...The first book of the Bible, Genesis, doesn’t say, “Back in the days when God created...” It says, “In the beginning....” The Book of Revelation, the final book in our Bible, speaks of “new creation,” God bringing about something new as God continues the work of creation:

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will

be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." (From Rev. 21)

Revelation promises us that God, who is A-Z (Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last), will someday finish the creation started so long ago, that God has not forgotten us but instead hovers over us, watching and feeding and guiding us. There will come a time when God will make everything new and bring forth completion... We need to keep our eyes and hearts open for the new things God may want to do through us and in our world today.

I believe that God wants us to see as OURS the challenge to open our arms even to folks we may not understand, approve, or like.... God wants us to get it through our thick skulls that EVERY child, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew – even atheist – is God’s child and part of God’s larger plan. If we are faithful to God, we may not declare *anybody* as unacceptable or unimportant to God! God will be the judge, for God knows every person’s heart. And when we know that God is right here with us as we go through life, we won’t have the need to condemn anybody else.

A few years ago I heard a young woman sing, "I've Got Peace Like A River." Not only was her voice incredibly smooth, her entire demeanor was as peaceful as I've ever witnessed in anyone. After the program was over, I was able to speak to the woman, to compliment her. I mentioned that she seemed to really have peace. She laughed a full-of-spirit laugh and confided, "Only by God's grace! My life is so torn up right now that my only real assurance besides God is that I know now I am not faking it. There is no way I can FAKE the peace God has given me. You see, my husband has just walked out on me and my son, who has cerebral palsy. My mother is dying of cancer. And I am about to be laid off my job -- I'm told I will be in the next round of cuts. So sister, when I sing of Jesus' peace, you'd better know that IT IS REAL, and He's what is holding me together!"

The Lord holds us together when nothing else can... The Bible tells us that God loves us so much that he gave us Jesus to show us the way to live. Jesus enters our lives so completely that we CAN follow his ways. The Bible would show us that though we cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try, God can and will save us. God WANTS to be "at home" with us. God wants to give us the kind of peace nobody can buy, understand, or take away from us.

God offers us a new kind of home, a home where we will *know* that God doesn’t just check up on us every now and then, but actually dwells with us, in our hearts. All we have to do is ask the Lord to come in and empower us to really love, forgive, give, and receive so as to let our lives be open to God’s ideas and overflowing love.

In her book, *Amazing Grace*, theologian Kathleen Norris told of a friend of hers who is a Catholic nun, who sat beside her own mother’s bed trying to give her comfort as she lay dying. The nun said, “Think, Mamma, you are about to enter heaven and everybody you love will be there.” The nun’s mother rose up from her pillow and said, “No. It’s not that everybody I love will be there. It’s that I will love everybody who’s there.” (Related by William Willimon, Pulpit

Resource, vol. 41, no. 2) A new home, a new vision...

In James' Epistle, chapter 4, which we shared as our Call to Worship today, we are promised, "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and God will lift you up." Herein seems to be the challenge of experiencing the peace and wholeness God offers us: We must draw near. We must love Jesus by "keeping his word." We must read the scriptures, must listen to the story of Jesus over and over again, and especially we must come before God in prayer, to receive what we need to follow. To "draw near" in this way is to become open us to the work of God's Holy Spirit.

A friend told me that he doesn't get into "praying" much, since it seems so selfish to ask for things from God. I realized that he thinks of prayer as reading off a list of wants and needs to God and then signing off. " God, this needs to be done, and I wish you'd do this, and please take care of that. Oh yes, and don't forget this situation...." If you have ever had a friend or acquaintance who calls you on the telephone only to talk and talk and never to let you get much of a word in, or one who lets you respond but who never seems to LISTEN to your response, then you probably understand how frustrating our "prayers" must be to God much of the time. For the kind of prayer that Jesus did was apparently as much LISTENING as LISTING. "Be still, and know that I am God." Be still. Be quiet. Let God fill YOU, let God help you see something new, inside or out. Let God make a home in your heart.... (pause)

One of my favorite stories tells that one day an artist was commissioned by a wealthy man to paint something that would depict peace. After a great deal of thought, the artist painted a beautiful country scene. There were green fields with cows standing in them, birds were flying in the blue sky and a lovely little village lay in a distant valley. The artist gave the picture to the man, but there was a look of disappointment on the patron's face. The man said to the artist, "This isn't a picture of true peace. It isn't right. Go back and try again."

The artist went back to his studio, thought for several hours about peace, then went to his canvas and began to paint. When he was finished, there on the canvas was a beautiful picture of a mother, holding a sleeping baby in her arms, smiling lovingly at the child. He thought, surely, this is true peace, and hurried to give the picture to the wealthy man. But again, the wealthy man refused the painting and asked the painter to try again. The artist returned again to his studio, discouraged, tired, disappointed, and angry over the rejection he felt. This time he prayed for inspiration to paint a picture of true peace. Suddenly an idea came, and he rushed to the canvas and began to paint as he had never painted before. When he finished, he hurried to the wealthy man. He gave the painting to the man. The man studied it carefully for several minutes and finally declared, "Now this is a picture of true peace." The picture showed a stormy sea pounding against a cliff. The artist had captured the fury of the wind as it whipped black rain clouds which were laced with streaks of lightening. The sea was roaring in turmoil, waves churning, the dark sky filled with the power of the furious thunderstorm. And in the middle of the picture, under a cliff, the artist had painted a small bird, safe and dry in her nest snuggled safely in the rocks. The bird was at peace in the midst the storm that raged about her." (This illustration found in several locations; original source unknown)

The One who began creation so long ago continues to offer peace and to bring forth something new today, even in our lives, as we respond to God's presence. Storms rage around us and sometimes right inside of us, the earth shakes and trembles, buildings collapse, floods come, and

nations rage. But God is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge (Psalm 46). No matter how hard or un-new our lives may seem, we may step forward each day trusting that, in every change and challenge, God is offering us God's presence and the vision of a new kind of home. "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them." May God's new creation and vision find a home in our hearts and lead us to follow Jesus in the ways of true and everlasting peace. Amen.