

Easter 6: God the Great Disrupter

Acts 10:44–48 Psalm 98 1 John 5:1–6 **John 15:9–17.**

From the high pulpit:

People have asked me why I don't preach from the high pulpit every Sunday. After all it increases visibility for us all.

I explain that I am uncomfortable with what I feel are the style and nature of "church" that this structure and my standing up here represent. Space and the way we use it is significant and infused with meaning.

This pulpit represents the church that I grew up in, where Father was up high everyone else was down below. These spatial dynamics remind me of the actual power relations of the church of the time and its theology. Power was largely invested in the clergy and lay people played a much lesser role, women especially.

Hierarchy

Right up front in our worship we begin the Prayer of Preparation by saying "Almighty God"... We are familiar with the notions of the absolute nature of God: All-powerful, all-knowing, eternal, unchangeable, infinite etc. etc. In the same way, we are used to the idea of being "servants of God". That makes sense to us because we understand hierarchical relationships. The relationship is defined by God's expectations and our diligence in working to do all that is expected of us.

Our theology, our understanding of God and the nature of the church have changed over time. There has been a flattening a "democratisation" if you like, of church structures with more attention – and power – given to lay people.

The readings set for today demonstrate this because they demonstrate what God has done, and continues to do:

Walk down to the nave.

Gospel

In the Gospel reading Jesus says:

“I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” It is radical for Jesus to call us friends, because it is a change of status. This is **God the Great Disrupter** in action.

No longer servants, we are called God’s friends. Jesus flattens the hierarchy, defying his followers’ expectations. He overturns hierarchical thinking, just like the moneychangers’ tables.

That may feel awkward and uncomfortable because friendship breaks down social barriers, shifts power dynamics, puts us on the same level. Usually, our friends are those with whom we feel on a level. The two sides of a friendship are understood as equal, and so we may not be sure how to respond when someone whom we regard as superior to us in some way suddenly begins to treat us as an equal, a friend. “I do not call you servants any longer, but friends.”

If that is true, then the substance of the relationship can no longer be about what I do for God. It is not about my *doing*.

If I were to judge the quality of my friendships purely by what my friends *do* for me, I wouldn’t really be treating them as friends.

So, if Jesus is inviting us to be his friends, we can to reflect on what it means to “*be*” for God, instead of “*do*” for God. The relationship is now defined by a mutual love and care, by an enjoyment of one another, by “*being*” for one another, rather than “*doing*”.

Acts 10

In the story in the passage from Acts, God does the same thing in the story about Peter: The Holy Spirit defies all Peter's expectations, breaks all the rules.

It has been a busy week for the early church because in between last week's story about the Ethiopian Eunuch and today's reading are the conversion of Saul on his way to Damascus, the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha or Dorcas from death in Joppa (Ch 9).

Peter has stayed in Joppa with Simon the Tanner, and one day, as he is praying around noon, he has a vision of a sheet full of animals being let down from heaven. A voice tells him to kill and eat – but there is a problem. All the animals in the sheet are ... **unclean**. Peter insists that he cannot do what the voice commands. He has never eaten an unclean thing in his life. The voice tells him, "Do not call impure anything that God has made clean." (10:15) Peter cannot figure out what this means, and it has to happen three times before he gets it.

Meanwhile, in Caesarea a Roman centurion has had a vision of his own, and being a God-fearer, he is obedient to the vision. He sends messengers to fetch Peter from Joppa.

Following hot on the heels of a vision, Peter does not know what to make of Cornelius' messengers, either. He senses that it is related to the vision, so he goes with them. When he arrives in Caesarea, Cornelius has assembled his entire household to hear what the Lord has to say through Peter.

Just as Peter is telling them about Jesus, something astonishing happens.

"While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God." (v. 44, 45)

There it goes again... **God the Great Disrupter** in action, because Gentiles do not even *begin* to be on Peter's radar yet.

He is still thinking as a Jewish Christian, the only kind of Christian he knows. He is astounded, along with the other Jewish believers who have come with him, that the Holy Spirit would move so dramatically and quickly among these "unclean" Gentiles.

Cornelius, the unclean, Gentile outsider, on the other hand, responds *immediately* to his vision and sends for Peter, no questions asked. When Peter arrives, Cornelius is waiting in faithful anticipation for whatever God might do.

So what about us?

Honestly? As the church, we are often the "faithful insiders" the "*astounded believers*" in our own story.

Can you think of a time when God acted in your life in the way described in today's readings? How did you respond?

Have we, perhaps, like Peter, resisted the Spirit when it did not match our expectations? How do we respond when the Holy Spirit interrupts our well-thought-out plans with a new direction?

Most often, *holy interruptions* feel like **disruptions**.

I conclude with a prayer: "God the Great Disrupter, we welcome you, forgive us for acting like Peter and help us to be more like Cornelius.

Amen"

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