



THINGS AREN'T THE SAME IN JOPPA THESE DAY

There are certain biblical texts that are unforgettable. This is one of them. I have preached on this dream many times, because I love it—but I've never dreamed about it. That is, until just the other night when I woke up early on a Sunday morning and realized that I had been having my own dream about Peter's dream at Joppa. So I did what any preacher does who is up way too early on Sunday morning. I grabbed a cup of coffee (coffee being God's gift to higher consciousness) and proceeded to scrap the original sermon I had planned, and share my dream instead.

Dreams render us vulnerable. They visit our sleep like intruders when our defences are down and they bear messages that remind us that there we are all a complicated, imperfect, work-still in progress mess. We can't control our dreams, but we had better pay attention to them.

The Holy Spirit has a way of arriving in moments when one is weak and conflicted, not when one is strong and self-assured--bearing counterintuitive messages that reveals how much we love the *idea* of change, but how deeply, how irrationally, we struggle with the reality of change.

You know the story, he is in Joppa, and at noon, which is prayer time, he goes up on the roof to pray, and then falls asleep. He is staying in the house of Simon the Tanner, a Gentile, who deals in unclean animals hides, and the whole place smells of tanning acid, and Peter has lost his appetite. He falls asleep hungry, and he had this vivid, amazing dream, what American Indians call a Big Dream. Something like a picnic blanket is lowered down from heaven, but in it is no picnic that Peter wants to be invited to. Instead of good kosher food for a good Jewish boy, it is full of creepy crawly, unclean things that mama said "don't eat" and the rabbi said, "listen to mama." Then comes the voice of God saying, I'm paraphrasing, "Lunch is served!"

Peter takes one look, and, to paraphrase says, Uggg. No, just not all that hungry Lord. Then he

gets preachy: "Nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." This is Peter the Boy Scout Jew—I've got every good conduct medal for righteous eating you can earn. I am Kosher Boy, reporting for service.

Now, let's face it, God has every reason to give up on Peter, but for some reason does not, and the voice of God says a second time, again I paraphrase, "Right, I know, you didn't order this, but for your own good, Peter, I've brought you the daily special--Gentile stew." Again, since why stop paraphrasing now, Peter says, "Looks great, and I'm sure it's good for me, but I'm watching what I eat these days. You might say I am "Yahwehterian" (that's a Hebrew pescetarian), and God says, "Get over it."

Finally a third time, and that's when you know it's serious, God offers this sacred meal disguised as religious heartburn. But Peter is still sitting at his childhood table and this unacceptable banquet stands in for the people he is struggling to believe are acceptable. Dietary aloofness becomes a symbol of ethnic aloofness. Can't touch that.

Then comes a line that thunders down the corridors of time, as still rattle the cages we hide in: What I call clean, says God, *you must not call profane*. So again, here it is: the lunch of the radical kingdom of right relationships. Do not turn your nose up at my cooking or my creation.

Poor Peter, he really is just like us. He is what you might call, if there was such a word: Gentilephobic. I can relate to this. I've got a few phobias of my own. As much as I hate to admit it, I am recovering racist; I am a recovering sexist: I am a recovering homophobe; I am a recovering xenophobe; I am a recovering anti-Semite. And here's one that will shock you. In America, I am a recovering Republican-phobe.

I must confess, since confession is good for the soul, that I cannot look at a picture of the current president without my heart clinching up like a

fist. By no means Lord, for nothing that vile has ever been set on the table at the White House!

Peter is a recovering Gentilephobe. That is, his response to Gentiles is automatic and negative. For Peter, like most of us, different is deficient.

But the truth is, all of us are in some stage of recovery. And here is what I mean. When I say that I am a recovering sexist, I mean that having grown up in the age of Playboy magazine, I learned that to be male means to objectify women.

When I say that I am a recovering homophobe, I mean that when I was growing up, the world was binary. There were straight people like me, and there were deviant people like them. They were called Homo-sexuals is how we said it, with emphasis on the homo. It was “peculiar” I heard people say. It’s just “ain’t right” I heard older people say. And then of course all those crude jokes that put all gay people in the same undifferentiated category of creepy, crawly things. Can’t touch that.

When I say that I am a recovering xenophobe, I means that when I heard the word “foreigner” it usually had the word “damn” in front of it. The idea that I some people would dare to come from someplace else—which means, of course, non-white, non-European people—and that “we” deserved to be here but “they” don’t, made me xenophobic. Can’t touch that.

When I am in an airport, and I see a person who looks Muslim, or a woman in hijab, and I will often think to myself: “Now Robin, don’t even think about whether that person as more likely to be a terrorist,” thereby confirming that that is exactly what I am thinking. Can’t touch that.

When I say that I am a recovering anti-Semite, I mean that Christian triumphalism was shot through my religious tradition growing up, but I didn’t know it. I was taught that all scribes and Pharisees we self-righteous and hypocritical while the disciples of Jesus were all humble, and pious, and knew the messiah when they saw him.

But let’s get real. When I say that I am a recovering racist, I mean that although you will never hear overtly racist remarks from me, this does not mean that the more subtle and subliminal racism of American culture has not

soaked into my bones. To prove my point, I am going to tell you what I did recently that proves in the most painful and embarrassing way that I am a recovering racist.

I was in Florida not long ago with a group of my friends who had invited me to play golf and to enjoy one another’s company. These are friends who like to play golf, as I do, and who like to go to really nice golf resorts—you know, the one’s the reek of white privilege.

So, one morning, at breakfast, we were lined up for the buffet, and it was crowded because there was a big conference happening at the resort. And as we got close to the serving line we could see that we were running out of plates. Not a crisis, obviously, but an annoyance in the world of white privilege. How will I carry my omelette to my table without a plate? Who do we tell around here that there are no plates?

At that moment, an African American man came around the corner, I thought he came out of the kitchen, and he looked at us in a way that suggested that he wondered, “What’s the problem?” So, impulsively, like Peter, I offered to speak for the group. “We’re out of plates” I said. He looked at me strangely. Turns out he had not come from the kitchen, he was with the conference, and he looked at me and said, “I don’t work here. Do I look like I work here?”

I could have crawled into a hole in the floor if there had only been one. I have never been so embarrassed in my life, or so certain that I am a recovering racist. The sad truth is, no matter how much I like to think that I would never make an assumption that an African American man in that particular setting is part of the staff, the help, I had obviously done exactly that.

Three things happened, however, that were redemptive about this “Robin is busted” moment. First my friends took enormous delight in teasing me about it for the rest of the trip. “You’d think a progressive minister, and a distinguished professor of social justice, would try to keep his white privilege in check” they laughed. Or when I missed a putt, “Still feeling guilty are we Robin.”

The second thing that was redemptive about it was that while I was trying to stammer out an apology, the man I had just insulted rose above it all and said “I’m going to keep my eye on you.” I

responded with nervous laughter. He must have seen the look of horror on my face, and decided to use humour to say, "I know people like you, lots of people like you, and they say things like, "Some of my best friends are black." But he made me laugh in that awkward moment—he took the edge off my profound embarrassment, and I remember thinking, how does he do it? How does he minister to me in this moment, and why is it that we don't understand why that goodwill cannot last forever?

The third redemptive thing that happened is that I decided that I would tell everyone this story when the time was right, including my own congregation, because I am fortunate enough to work in the kind of church community that can hear this story, even about their senior minister. What's more that if I don't tell people what a stupid thing I did, you might think, that 1) I never do stupid things; or 2) the stupid things you do are never to be shared with me, or with your friends, or with your partner or spouse—so that we can all walk around acting like we don't do stupid things, we don't turn up our noses up at anyone or anything because we are all enlightened, post-modern, over-educated, tree-hugging vegans, or pescetarians, or flexitarians, or raw-foodists (whatever that is).

Here's what I'm saying. *Privilege, especially white privilege, is insidious.* That African American man, who was attending a conference in the same golf resort where I was enjoying time with my friends was sharing in the same success and privilege that I enjoy, said exactly what the Holy Spirit said to Peter after he turned up his nose at the Gentile picnic from hell. "I'm going to keep my eye on you." I know people like you, and you are hereby put on notice that I've got you figured out, but I'm not giving up on you either.

The last phobia I want to confess to this morning is one I share with the majority of church people. Neophobia, the fear of new things. We are all recovering neophobics. The seven last words of the church are: *we've never done it that way before.*

Change is difficult. People have different ideas about what constitutes sacred music, which is why the worst church fights in church are so often about music. But when music is offered as a gift to God, not as a performance, it may be to our liking or not to our liking, but it is not

profane. It is an offering. We may be thinking, "By no means Lord, for nothing that folksy or country western has ever passed my lips." Can't touch that. But in the Beloved Community, the emphasis is always on the Beloved, not on the gift.

I'm sure that when the early Jesus People started eating with Gentiles, the keepers of the tradition said, "Things aren't the same in Joppa these days." But at the very same moment, other people were joyfully saying it with a different tone of voice. They were saying, "Things aren't the same in Joppa these days!"

When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln after the American Civil War, I'm sure people in the south said, "Things aren't the same in the Confederacy these days." But other people, who used to be called "the help" said it differently, "Things aren't the same in the Confederacy these days. Mr. Lincoln says we're free!"

Just a few years ago, when same-sex marriage became legal in all 50 states, lots of people in Oklahoma said, "Things aren't the same in Matrimony these days." But at that very moment, others were coming in droves to Mayflower to the same gender-loving partner they had been living with for 15-20-30 years. And they said joyfully with a different tone of voice: "Things aren't same in Matrimony these days. The Supreme Court says we are people too."

Have you heard? The picture of a former slave, Harriet Tubman, is going on the front of the American \$20 bill, and a slave owner, Andrew Jackson, is being moved from the front to the back. "Things aren't the same in Joppa these days."

I live in Oklahoma, at the end of what was called the Trail of Tears, where we rounded up the five civilized tribes and marched them across the southern U.S. and dumped them in Oklahoma. And Andrew Jackson signed the order that gave us the Trail of Tears, so thank God people can say it now: "Things are the same in Joppa these days."

And that's what I dreamed about. I dreamed about the church as a place where we try, by the grace of God, not to turn our noses up at anyone. I dreamed about a place where people could hold

hands in church with their same-gender partner or spouse and nobody would think anything of it, except to say, "Aren't they a beautiful couple?" I dreamed of a place where a transgender person could hand out bulletins before church and nobody would think anything of it, except to say "thank you."

I dreamed of a place where there are new voices in the pulpit, and new music, and with new ways of being the Beloved Community without being condescending or judgmental about it. I dreamed of a place where lives could be rebuilt by refusing to give up on anyone—I dreamed of a safe place to confess that we are often frightened

people who do lots of stupid things, and make lots of lame excuses, and gossip and lie and tear down others--forgetting that white privilege and Christianity are mutually exclusive.

"Can we get some plates?" Did I really say that?

One of these days, it will not occur to me to say that, and you know why? Because Somebody's got their eye on me, and on you, even on the sparrow. It's true: Things aren't the same in Joppa these days. And all I can say to that is . . .

Thanks be to God! Amen.