

Title: Playing In The Sandbox
February 20, 2022
Texts: Psalm 133 Acts 11.1-18
Series: Anew! Playing In Scripture With Fresh Eyes, Ears & Heart
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Acts 11:1-18 (NRSV)

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Scripture read in worship
is a group activity.
And even when
we read scripture
on our own,
we still do so
as part of
our larger faith community.....

Where our reading
is nurtured and shaped
and informed by
our fellow disciples,
and by 2,000+ years
of community tradition.

And, as we all know,
or as we should know,
life in community always requires
playing well together.....

Exhibiting toward one another
the same kindness and grace
we know in Jesus –

especially when it
comes to scripture!

And yet,
the history of the Church
tells a very different story,
doesn't it?

Being the imperfect human beings
that we are,
present day church members,
like us,
and all the
ancestors in faith
who have proceeded us.....

Have, to a remarkable degree,
continually demonstrated
the ability to
bicker and murmur
and disagree and argue
and even physically fight
about all manner of things.....

Like church doctrine,
and the right language
to use for baptism,
and the color
of the carpeting
in the sanctuary,
and the landscaping
around the church building,
and on and on and on.....

And we disciples of Jesus
are particular adept at disagreeing
when it comes to scripture!

Is scripture read literally?
Is it read and understood
within its historical context?
Which version of scripture
do we use?

I mean, didn't God
speak in King James?

Since only the New Testament
speaks about Jesus,
do we really need
the Hebrew Scriptures?

How is a particular word
translated from the original
Hebrew or Greek?

Especially when it doesn't have
an English equivalent?

Do the societal norms of a culture that existed
in the Ancient Near East four thousand years ago,
two thousand years ago.....

Do these ancient norms continue to guide, even dictate,
our societal norms today?

Reading scripture is not, and never has been,
for the faint of heart.

Reading scripture takes energy
and intelligence, and imagination,
and above all, love!

And there is one other really important ingredient
for reading scripture.....

But let's not yet move too far
into that detail, lest we get ahead of ourselves!

I think this is a good time to remember
of our February refresher course
on how to read scripture for faith formation –
for the forming and the re-forming of our faith.

This focus comes from the confirmands
we welcomed into full church membership
a few weeks ago.

An important part
of their preparation for membership
is learning how to read scripture
in a thoughtful, and critical,
and imaginative, and faithful way.

Since confirmation learning
for most of us has been in
the rear-view mirror for some time now.....

Our focus on scripture
is helping us practice
the life-long learning,
Jesus invites and expects
his disciples to do!

Today's scripture lesson
from the book of Acts
tells the story
of an early church fight.....

Where there was great controversy
over reading and understanding scripture,
and over exactly who
the gift of life
in Jesus was for.

Our story occurs
in the earliest years

of church history.....

Most likely before there were any letters
from the Apostle Paul being circulated to the churches
he had founded.....

And certainly before there were any Gospel accounts
of Jesus' life and ministry.....

And hundreds of years before the document
we call the New Testament
was assembled and agreed upon.

In these early days, Christianity was little more
than a reform movement within Judaism.

Jesus the Jewish Rabbi came to seek and save
the lost of Israel.....

And his disciples who carried this mission on
after Jesus' death did not stray from his initial path.

But there was restlessness even in these early days
as to the exclusive or inclusive nature
of the church. Was the Gospel
of God's love just for some people?
Or was it meant for all people?

Our story centers around
Peter, disciple extraordinaire,
the rock upon whom
Jesus promised to build his church.....

And Cornelius,
a Roman military
and political leader.

These two begin having visions
that eventually lead them
to one another.....

Resulting in Peter
accepting Cornelius' invitation
to visit him in Caesarea,
so that he
and his household
might listen to
what the Lord
commanded Peter to tell them.

Well, Peter starts to preaching,
and before long
we are told
that Peter sees
signs of the Holy Spirit
present among Cornelius and company.

In the early church

the presence of
the Holy Spirit
was understood to be
an invitation for baptism.....

Which is exactly
what Peter does
even though Cornelius and company
are not Jewish,
but are Gentiles.

Given the visions
Peter has been having
in recent days,
he doesn't pause to question
this unusual presence
of the Spirit,
Peter just starts sharing
Water in abundance.
Eventually Peter returns to Jerusalem,
where he sits down
with other members and leaders
of the early church,
and describes what God
has been teaching him
and having him do
in recent days.

The others are
loving Peter's story
of God declaring
all food clean,
and thus no longer subject
to Jewish purity laws.

And the others are enraptured
by how God brings
Peter and Cornelius together
for Gospel sharing.

And the others are amazed
when the Holy Spirit appears
in the presence of Gentiles.

But then when
Peter tells the others
that he baptized the Gentiles –
well, they lose their minds.....

And begin yelling at Peter,
and yelling at each other.....

For there is no way,
NO WAY,
that those who do not

live under Jewish law
as described in the
Hebrew Scripture books
of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus,
Numbers, and Deuteronomy.....

There is no way
that God would allow
these strangers, these foreigners,
the very same gift
that God's chosen people enjoy.

The Holy Spirit,
like God's love,
is only for them
and no one else!

And just when
all hell is about to
break loose in
this particular church assembly,
something unexpected happens.

In a moment
of great clarity,
those gathered realize that God,
through the power and presence
of the Holy Spirit.....

Is leading them
and the young church
into new and uncharted territory.....

Newness which is
beyond the bounds of tradition,
and beyond the bounds of sacred law,
and even beyond
the bounds of scripture.

Instead of having a fight
over how to read
and understand scripture,
this church assembly is silenced
by the Holy Spirit.....

And they listen and respond
as the Spirit reminds everyone
how God expects Jesus' disciples
to play together
and pray together
and read scripture together.

It is an amazing story;
a story which changes
the direction of the church forever;
a story which

enables we Gentiles
to be here today
as disciples of Jesus!

As we consider
what the story
of Peter and Cornelius
teaches us about
reading and utilizing scripture.....

I want to point to
Presbyterian Pastor and preaching professor,
Anna Carter Florence,
who equates reading
scripture together in community
to the experience
of playing in
a sandbox with others.

As children, says Florence,
we all learn
rules of etiquette
to keep sandbox play
fair and safe.

As we listen
to the ten
sandbox rules she offers,
let us consider
how these rules apply
to our reading of scripture.

The rules are:

- 1) Sand is fun
- 2) Sand is messy
- 3) Shovels are for digging, not hitting
- 4) Don't be bossy. Let others build in their own way
- 5) You can knock over what you build, but not what someone else has built
- 6) Be kind to babies and toddlers, who haven't learned the rules yet
- 7) If you need help, ask a grown up
- 8) Keep the neighborhood cats out of the sandbox
- 9) What we build in sand doesn't last forever
- 10) Come back tomorrow and build again

Reading scripture is both
more fun and more meaningful
when we read it with others.

Reading scripture is also
more fun and more meaningful
when we gracefully
allow and welcome
the different approaches
and different perspectives
we all bring

to the reading table.

Reading scripture and living scripture
becomes more exciting
and more challenging
when we listen
to the guiding
of the Holy Spirit.....

For the Spirit
always pushes us
beyond the rules
and beyond our comfort zone.....

Pushes us out
into the presence of God,
where all things are possible!

For our spiritual homework this week,
let's find at least one partner
to read scripture with.....

And as we read together,
let us practice
the sandbox rules
for our reading.....

That we may listen well,
and explore our discipleship deeply,
and welcome the Holy Spirit
taking us wherever
God desires us to be.

Who are we,
that we could hinder God?

Amen!!!

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Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God's Word in Community*