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Acts 11:1-15

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Dragged Along by the Spirit

Has anyone here preached a sermon series about pacifism in a church not committed to pacifism?

Imagine a little Mennonitelet walking into a church with a great diversity of beliefs, ranging from practical pacifism, just-war theory, and pro-militarism to preaching a sermon on turning swords into plowshares. You’d think, this is a recipe for disaster, cause people are just going to raise up their defenses at this radical pacifist, who does not know anything about the real world. Because yes, I don’t know anything about the real world and who am I to preach about war to veterans?

I’m just someone dragged by the Holy Spirit, from where I am, to someplace new.

First I start with honesty, the Bible includes both Isaiah’s dream of turning swords into plowshares, and Joel, calling us to prepare for war, stir up the warriors, and beat your plowshares into swords. So I have no authority to say, “you’re wrong” because our scriptures leave room for many ways of thinking.

But what I can say, is where I feel the Holy Spirit dragging me. And so I preached about the Word of God as a foolish, alien way of thinking that challenges our conventional beliefs. The Word of God is not a comfortable word that fits into the way things work but is a dream that can change the world. And don’t we all dream of a world where peace reigns, even if we disagree on whether we live in this world?

I wonder how Peter felt about returning to Jerusalem. Was he afraid of criticism? Embolden by doing what he thought was right? The Holy Spirit dragged him into a new world, a new logic for how Jews and Gentiles related. There were very good reasons why Jews and Gentiles could not eat together. Leviticus explains that Jewish people must not eat unclean animals so that they do not become like the other nations. The Jewish people were supposed to be holy, set apart. Gentiles could be accepted as God-fearers, and sit in the back of the synagogue. Gentiles were supposed to have become like the Jews, but table fellowship risked that these two groups would become like each other.

And so the apostles criticize Peter, saying “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Peter, don’t you know that we live in a world where Jews and Gentiles should be kept separate? And Peter tells them about the vision he received where God declared the unclean animals clean. So, if God declares every animal clean, then the whole system of holiness, set-apartness has a kink in it. The boundary walls set between these people are broken down like a river that overflows a levee, and table fellowship and the Holy Spirit flows out to all the people of the earth. And as the waters of hospitality rise, the other apostles are swept away into the river of life. The Holy Spirit drags all of them into a whole new world, where God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

The Holy Spirit drags us from where we are, to someplace new! Hallelujah!

Where has the Holy Spirit dragged you? What are the biblical texts the Holy Spirit dragged you away from, like Leviticus telling Peter not to eat with gentiles? I admit that when this happens to me this is a disorienting experience. It is like conversion or transformation where we die to the old logic and grow into a new one. When this happens to us, let us not judge people who believe what we used to believe. I love each and every one of you where you are at because I trust that we are all seeking the way of Jesus. A way of many names, the way of love, forgiveness, doing right, seeking peace, and experiencing the divine.

For my mother, the gentiles were women, who the general conference did not allow to become preachers until April 2, 1982. My mother explained that in her youth she told midwestern youth that she had female deacons at Albany Mennonite, and by how those youth avoided her afterward, it was clear that they lived in different worlds. There’s a quote in 1 Corinthians that women should be silent in church but once she saw the Holy Spirit moving through women, she lived in a world where it was no longer odd to have women in church leadership.

I hope you lend me your hearts, as I confess my own dragging of the Holy Spirit.

When I was in seminary, a queer friend confided in me that they were gay, at first I was shocked, but then I saw the goodness in them, their amazing preaching, and how they sought justice for their siblings in Christ on campus. I saw the Holy Spirit working in them. Or the first time I saw a panel of queer Mennonite pastors at a convention, whose faith could move mountains and how they cared for each of their congregants, both queer and straight. I was faced with a dilemma. So I opened up those Bible scriptures and found out that they said much more about the importance of marriage, than who people loved. It felt like God was saying to me, what God has made clean, you must not call profane.

And the scriptures were opened to me because the Holy Spirit dragged me into a new world where the boundaries between who is part of the promise and who shall be held at arms reach crumble down.

How are you transformed when you hear a queer preacher?

Any Holy Spirit transformation should be startling to you, it was startling for the apostles. Moreover, stories of how the Holy Spirit drags people are tested by the community, just like Peter was tested. But I think the most important lesson this teaches the church is the importance of interplanetary communication. Each of us is shaped by our own experiences in life and with the Holy Spirit. We are all being dragged around, by our parents, friends, and society. And so we’ve got to learn how to speak to one another about the lens through which we read the scriptures. Because we all see through the mirror dimly, stumbling about trying to figure out where the Holy Spirit is dragging us next. I cannot tell you what to believe or who is right. But what I can do is witness to how I have been dragged by the Holy Spirit. From where I am at, to someplace new. Hallelujah!