

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Several years ago, I attended the largest preaching conference in the country. For five days, about fifteen hundred preachers from all different denominations gathered to practice preaching, talk about preaching, listen to preachers, and share preaching resources. This might not sound like your idea of a fun week, but I found the conference inspiring and refreshing. I got to listen to several famous preachers from all over — big names that would only mean something in very small and very nerdy circles. Interestingly, the absolute best preacher was someone I had never heard of. I was so moved by her words that I changed my conference itinerary so that I could go to every session that she taught for the rest of my time there.

Bishop Yvette Flunder founded a church in Oakland in 1991. City of Refuge United Church of Christ was born out of a need for people outside the mainstream of the church to gather with one another for worship. Lots of churches wouldn't allow women to preach, or gays and lesbians to join, or poor or sick people to be connected. And so City of Refuge welcomed everyone. That first Sunday, they had 27 people. And almost 20 years later, they're one of the biggest churches in Oakland.

Bishop Flunder is extraordinary. She preached something that I've never forgotten. She said,

“Sometimes I think the biggest mistake the church has made is putting the back cover on the Bible. We cannot confine Jesus so that we do not have to change. Jesus will break out every time. He is all about breaking out. We are in the presence of a free and living and dancing and system breaking Jesus. People are getting freer and free people free people.”

I think she's right. Sometimes, we take those two covers on the bible and treat them as if they're the base and the lid of a coffin. And that's simply not true. Our Savior is alive. Our faith is alive. Our relationships with one another and with God are alive.

The church has been straining against self-imposed limits since the first day of its formation. The apostles spent a good portion of their time trying to figure out who was in and who was out; what was sacred and what was profane. Peter arrives in Jerusalem and is almost immediately criticized for breaking bread with the wrong kind of believer. Some believers were circumcised and some weren't. Some followed certain dietary restrictions and some didn't. Peter didn't observe those divisions, and the leadership of the church was angry at him. Let me tell you something; if the leadership of the church is not angry with you from time to time, you're probably doing something wrong.

Peter watched as the Holy Spirit landed on the heads of all kinds of different people — those who followed the ancient dietary laws and those who didn't. The Spirit of God made no distinction between Jew and Greek, man and woman, slave and free. In every generation of the church, this is a lesson that we have to learn again and again. There is something deeply rooted

in our human nature that seems to want to divide people — categorize them into boxes of one sort or another. But the living God will not have that. The mailman is your brother. The refugee is your sister. And I would go as far as to say that the story that your friend shares with you in moments of grief or of great joy is your scripture. The Spirit constantly pushes us, the church, to expand our notions of who is welcome at the Lord's Table. If our answer is not, "everyone," then we still have work to do.

It's easy for me in the pulpit to tell you about God's vision for the inclusion of all people at God's table. Please don't think I have this kind of thinking perfected. I like the rules of the church that keep things neat and orderly. I dislike the messiness that comes when people who think differently than me are all of a sudden called my brothers and sisters in Christ. And yet, that is what our living God is all about. The Spirit of God is constantly asking us to reimagine our religious borders. And when we do, like Peter, we're called to go and preach the Good News of a God who lives.

None of the apostles had ever been to a fancy preaching conference. They shared their own, lived, personal, chaotic experiences of God with friends and strangers. That's it. We are the heirs of the apostles. We have lots of fancy clothes and words and buildings now, but the essence of the Christian message and its delivery hasn't changed at all. Regular people experience a God who cannot be bound by priests, or books or, rules, or tombs, and those regular people go and tell others. And then, arm in arm, we are a movement who can change the world. It really is that easy.

Another preacher and writer that I admire died a few weeks ago. I know that Rachel Held Evans was a beacon of light for many people in our country — a former evangelical thinker and writer who rejected the fundamentalist teachings of her youth to imagine a more expansive and inclusive church. In her typically succinct style, she wrote, "The folks you're shutting out of the church today will be leading it tomorrow. That's how the Spirit works. The future's in the margins." She could easily have written this after reading today's story from the Acts of the Apostles. Over and over in scripture, Jesus points us to the unlikely edges to find the activity of God.

The apostles' teachings on the expansive love of God serve as an antidote to the teachings of the princes of the world. Particularly in our currently rhetorical climate, politicians seem to vilify the weak, the vulnerable, the sick, and the needy. If you're poor, get a job. If you're sick and uninsured, too bad. If you're transgender, live a lie. If you're a refugee escaping violence, go back. What evil nonsense. That is not scripture. That is not alive. That is not God. I can't give you specific policy recommendations, but I can tell you that if you start with the premise that everyone you meet at the margins is your beloved sibling, then you can't go far wrong.

You don't need to attend the largest preaching conference. You ARE the largest preaching conference. Scripture is alive and living among us, let us follow it. Jesus is alive and living among us, let us follow Him. Amen.