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Salem Lutheran Church

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Extraordinary Ordination and Installation Worship Service for Jen Nagel

A Tale of Three Cities

Text: Acts 10: 34 - 43

My 10-year-old niece, Alexandria, has had a revolutionary effect upon me over the past few months. When you are single and have lived alone for almost 20 years, the presence of a child in your living space can be revolutionary. Through her eyes I see the world in a different way. When the blanket of humanity is revealed to her she doesn't see clean and unclean. She sees possibilities for friendship. I so desperately want her to remain spirited this way, but I know that she will one day be challenged by other ways of thinking. In light of this, I try to infuse notions of reformation and resistance within her. I try to lift up models of extraordinary lives. I want her to understand the difference between Brittney Spears and Barbara Jordan, the difference between Soldier Boy and Oscar Romero, and the difference between the commercial and the committed. We have been singing a song at bedtime. It is called "I am Willing" by Holly Near and the lyrics are:

I am open and I am willing.
 For to be hopeless is so strange.
 It dishonors those who go before us.
 So lift me up to the light of change.

It is such openness and willingness that makes it possible for a person to be extraordinary. Because you have to be open to change and willing to live a life of reformation and resistance. You have to know that when the spirit calls you into a situation that challenges the system you have to make a decision -- either to help or to hinder the work of God.

In this Lutheran context on this holiday weekend, I cannot help but to look at two extraordinary lives. Martin Luther and Martin Luther King were two persons who committed themselves to the vision of their lives as instruments of God's peace and mercy. Maybe what is so extraordinary about such people in such times is the fact that they could do nothing less than stand as a witness of God's revelation of love and grace. They were present and accounted for when their day came. When it was time to nail his statement to the church doors, Martin Luther was there. When it was time for him to write his letter from a jail cell, Martin Luther King was there. To paraphrase the writer and poet Audre Lorde, you could say that by having done their work such extraordinary persons come in spirit to ask us if we are doing ours.

It is a fair question because we are living in an extraordinary time. And if we take the question seriously we must survey the things to which we have pledged our allegiance. We must move beyond the “see no evil, hear no evil, and do no evil” approach to living. For to ignore the vision of love, to refuse to listen to the drumbeat of justice, and to be indifferent to the work of righteousness dishonors all the work of those who have come before us. Yes, these are extraordinary times where the spirit is calling us into situations that challenge the system and we are forced to make a decision-- either to help or to hinder the work of God.

As I was preparing this sermon someone asked me, “Why is what we are doing today so extraordinary?” I did not have to wrestle for an answer. For it lies close to my heart. As a lesbian clergy person at best, I have often felt like Cornelius, the god fearer, in our text. Cornelius was a man who knew God but was not part of the church due to his being uncircumcised. At worst, I have felt like an estranged daughter. A few years ago I was very ill and went home to my parents in Kansas for a rest. The church elders from my mother’s congregation came by to lay hands on me. They spent thirty minutes talking about the sin and shame of homosexuality before they prayed over my body. I was sure their words had left bruises where their hands had touched my flesh. These same elders who had blessed my life when I was a child, now burdened me with the jagged thrust of their offense. I suffered in silence because I would not pay the price to be free, to tell the truth, to be out. Today because of the example of Jen, I am willing to pay that price, to be a person of integrity.

So I did not have to look hard to articulate why this day is so extraordinary and why its excitement is shared. This day is not just for Jen. It is not just for Salem. It is not just for Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries or the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, though it is clearly a day for both. It is also a day for me, my mother, and the elders in her church. It is a day for all those who are open and willing to the Spirit. It is for those who believe in reformation and resistance. It is a day for my niece, Alexandria.

For being “out” as a LGBT minister is an act of integrity, not celebrity. It is not just your life that is dependent upon your disclosure, but the lives of so many others who want to be made whole, who want integrity in their lives.

Today, I also come to bear witness to the ministry of Jen Nagel. I will never forget the first sermon I heard her preach. It was entitled “A Leap of Faith.” I was so impressed because she spoke to both my needs and to the needs of the Salem congregation. That is not an easy thing to do. It helped that both I and the congregation were in transition. We were both needing to take a leap of faith. I was a black, blind lesbian clergywoman trying to deal with great personal and professional transition and Salem was a historic congregation in a historic building trying to deal with a changing neighborhood. Jen’s gift of ministry helped me beyond measure and I know that she has offered great ministry to the Salem congregation.

Our text today speaks of another church in transition, the early church which faced the extraordinary challenge of Gentile expansion. There had long been Gentiles who

converted to the Jewish faith, but these individuals were different from God-fearers like Cornelius in Acts 10. God-fearers were not circumcised and therefore not included within the Jewish religion.

As an uncircumcised Gentile, Cornelius was considered to be unclean. He was not the company an observant Jew, like Peter, would keep. In other words, Peter's coming to the house of Cornelius was a bold act. It was unlawful for a Jew to come to the home of a gentile. But Peter followed the Spirit and not the sanction. And the Spirit said "Amen," by falling on the house of Cornelius

The situation begs you to ask what would move Peter to break custom by going to the home of and eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. In the preceding verses, we read that Peter was staying at the home of Simon the tanner in Joppa. This alone is a significant fact since a tanner was, by trade, continually in contact with dead animals and, therefore, unclean. Peter's acceptance to stay at the home of Simon was an indication that Peter was in process. He was beginning to take risks that he may not have taken before this time. The risk comes before the revelation.

One afternoon, while Peter was on the roof he fell into a trance. He was shown a blanket filled with various animals, all of which were forbidden for Jews to eat. He refrained three times when he was commanded by a voice to "kill and eat." The winds of change were blowing. The tradition was being challenged. The Spirit was moving. Peter understood this vision to be a sign of God's love for all nations. That revelation testified God's grace and the good news of Jesus Christ. If Peter were to have denied the truth of what was revealed to him he would have dishonored the very gospel he preached.

After the revelation, Peter was commanded to arise and go with the men who were looking for him. The Spirit did not give him a roadmap. There was no itinerary. There was no committee consensus. There was only the calling of the Spirit to go. It was an extraordinary risk, at an extraordinary time, and an extraordinary message.

What would you do if you were faced with such a challenge? Peter did have a choice. He could have remained in Joppa, but he was open and willing to the Spirit. Martin Luther had a choice. Martin Luther King had a choice. We each have a choice. When the Spirit calls us into situations that challenge the system we have to make a decision. Are you going to help or to hinder the work of God.

In these extraordinary times, I hear the spirit challenging us to be open and willing. For There is an extraordinary message to share. It is the same message Peter shared with the household of Cornealus. The good news has not changed, "God is not partial." God's love is for those who are Circumcised and those who are unCircumcised. God is not partial. God loves us all. We are not barred from God because of our nationality, our gender, our sexual orientation, our political affiliation, our occupation, our physical ability, or any other mark of identity. God is not partial. God loves us all.

In Acts 11, we read of how the brethren in Jerusalem were angry when they heard of the spirit's movement and Peter's action at Caesarea. The brethren were ritual-bound, but not eternally so. Sometimes it takes a while for the brothers and sisters, the "church folk" back in Jerusalem to get with the spirit. It's easy to be angry with them because it all seems so clear to you. If you are one like Peter, who has seen the revelation, you can get tired of always having to be the teacher, the torch bearer, or the trail blazer. Why don't the "church folk" get it? They have not been open to the revelation, yet.

There are brothers and sisters from every denomination and faith who have yet to be open to the vision of God's radical, inclusive love. Some of us are so partial to nationality, sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity that we cannot appreciate or celebrate the full blanket of humanity. I'm so glad, though, God has not called us to wait on "church folk", but to follow the spirit. This is exactly what makes extraordinary times so exceptional -- the winds of the Spirit lifting us up to change.

If Peter had been closed and unwilling the work of God would have been hindered. In Acts 11, he admits this. If he were concerned about what the folks back home would have thought about his associating with Cornelius he would have hindered the work of God. If we paid attention to what people thought about our actions some of us would never move beyond our front doors, let alone out of our closets. Sometimes you have to listen to the spirit in Joppa, and do the work of God in Caesarea knowing full well that there will be fallout from the church in Jerusalem. This is the true tale of this text. This is the message for us today. If we are going to be extraordinary in these extraordinary times we must be Unafraid of what other "church folk" think about the Spirit's movement in our lives and in our communities.

Jen, don't worry about Jerusalem. Listen to the Spirit in Joppa and do the work of God in Ceasaera. Salem, don't worry about Jerusalem. Listen to the spirit in Joppa and do the work of God in Ceasaera. And as Mary J. Blige would say, "Don't get it twisted." The Jerusalem to which I refer isn't just other "church folk." Sometimes the greatest Jerusalem we contend with is the voices of Jerusalem within ourselves. Our own fears. Our own negative outlook. Our own idolatry of tradition. Do not allow yourself to miss the blessing at Ceasaera because you are so frightened of Jerusalem. Be strong and remember the revelation you received in Joppa.

Finally, in these extraordinary times, let us choose to be extraordinary, to be part of a community of reformation and resistance so that we can truly sing:

I am open and I am willing.
 For to be hopeless is so strange.
 It dishonors those who go before us.
 So lift me up to the light of change.

There is a hurting
 in my family
 and there is sorrow

in my town
There is panic
all across the nation
and there is wailing
the whole world around

But I am open
and I am willing
For to be hopeless
is so strange
It dishonors those who
go before us
So lift me up
to the light of change

May the children
see more clearly
and may the elders
be more wise
May the winds of
change caress us
Even though they
burn our eyes

But I am open
and I am willing
For to be hopeless
is so strange
It dishonors those who
go before us
So lift me up
to the light of change