

Stretching Lessons

Part 5 in the Series Faithful Saints

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Acts 11:1-18

Has anyone here ever started to take yoga lessons, or any kind of flexibility training, like pilates? Me too. This has been my experience of beginning these kinds of classes. The first class, I walk in and immediately try to find the last row and/or corner because I know that I am not going to be doing this well. In fact, I will probably make a fool of myself more than once. In addition, my ability to tell my right side from the left completely disappears the second I lay on my yoga mat. During the class I am invited into stretching to the point of being uncomfortable, and at that point the teacher will usually say something like, “ok, now take just a little further now” and some words not fit for this room may pass through my head, but I am obedient and stretch that bit further while wondering how in the heck I am paying for this instead of the other way around.

That is only the beginning right? Because the next day you try to do something simple, like reach for a bottle on a high shelf, and everything hurts. But, like most physical training, the secret is to go back and doing it again, and again, and it turns out that your body all of a sudden get used to this stretching, and if you miss a class, your body doesn’t work as well. And you realize that stretching has become essential to your body and life. It becomes your new normal.

We can see the same kind of stretching of the new faith in Jesus Christ happening in the Book of Acts which tells stories of the early church. Those who are in Jerusalem are finding that as the faith reaches out beyond the city, new challenges are brought back to them and they are confronted with uncomfortable stretches to welcome the usually unwelcome.

In fact, I contend that the Book of Acts can be viewed as a series of stretching lessons for the young faith called “the Way” until at the end “the Way” has evolved into a new and more widely inclusive faith that comes down to today that allows you and me to be a part of this Jesus way, and is still calling us to stretch our faith.

In this passage, another stretch is being orchestrated by the Holy Spirit – where Peter is called to go to a traditional enemy – the Roman army in particular and the Gentiles more generally.

In our text, we are looking at the aftermath of a story told in the previous chapter – where Peter is led by the Holy Spirit into a dramatic experience of baptizing a gentile (non-Jewish) family, and eating with them and staying at their house.

It started with a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a member of the Italian Cohort. A centurion is the head of a century, like a captain today – of about 100 men. Like Paul, he is a Roman citizen, but he is a Gentile. Cornelius was stationed at a city called Caesarea, a maritime port that becomes very important in the Roman empire, and second only to the city of Alexandria in Egypt. It was the other major building project of Herod the Great, according to the ancient writer Josephus, who had expanded the temple in Jerusalem to honor his Jewish heritage; Caesarea (Caesarea Maritima) is a gentile building program, a counterpoint to rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, according to Flavius Josephus who knew the city well.

The shorter story of what happened is this: Cornelius belongs to a group of folks called God-fearers – gentiles who are attracted to the Jewish faith, but will not take the step of circumcision to become Jews. They are on the periphery – with some yearnings for God. Cornelius is visited by a messenger from God to go to Joppa (where a nascent community has already been formed by a visit from the apostle Philip) where he will find Simon/Peter. He sends three of his men to go to Joppa and find Peter.

At the same time, Peter is praying and receives a dream three times in which he is told, contrary to Jewish teachings, that all food is clean according to God. Once the messengers from Cornelius arrive, he realizes the meaning of the dream, and goes to Cornelius' house in Caesarea, where Peter realizes that the meaning of his dream was that God shows no partiality among people, and with the Holy Spirit descending on everyone, he baptizes all of Cornelius' household.

That's not all – because in the process, Peter fraternizes with members of the household of Cornelius - a Roman Centurion – the very kind of folks who had crucified Jesus as a criminal and oppressed the Jewish communities. That was a huge leap of trust, given the circumstances.

It's a magical moment in the story of the Christian faith. And now he's going to have to return to Jerusalem and tell the Jewish leaders of "the way" what he did and why. There's just one catch – what Peter did by eating with Cornelius' family upended more than a thousand years of the Jewish faith and rules.

So, here's the story – a story of a community grappling with how to catch up with the Holy Spirit's leading. A story about a leader who has gone from denying Jesus in his greatest hour of need to walking in trust as God leads him out beyond the boundaries of known Jewish identity.

Can you imagine Peter coming back to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith, where he will tell everyone that he has included people into God's covenant that most Jews would not even sit at table with. In the most diplomatic terms, Acts says that the circumcised believers "criticized him." The word in Greek for criticize shares meaning with the verb *discriminate*. The leaders are going to ask some hard questions. In other words, Peter had some explaining to do.

I'm reminded of this statement I came across this week:

"To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing."

Peter had stepped out, but now, Peter must explain. Peter's response is detailed. He walks the leaders through his experience of dreams and what happened after. And a crucial piece of his explanation can be found in verse 12:

"The Spirit told me to go with [the messengers from Cornelius] them and not to make a distinction between them and us." (Acts 11:12)

And that word, "distinction" – yes, it is the same word that is used to when the disciples are "criticizing" him. Peter's argument back to the Jerusalem leaders is that the Holy Spirit told him not to make distinctions.

Whether to discriminate or not? That was the question that the early church grappled with as this Jesus way suddenly got way bigger than they thought.

That still seems to be the question. See, we've been here before as the church.

We've been here before on the issue slavery.

We've been here before on the issue of divorce,

We've been here before on the issue of anti-Semitism.

We've been here before on the role of women in the church and their leadership.

And God is not done with us – to believe in the Holy Spirit means that we still need to ponder the same kind of stretching lessons that the early church did, that our ancestors did.

We've been here before, and the Holy Spirit seems to be still leading us out to places that make us uncomfortable, to people that will challenge our understanding of the world God wants for us and our place as children of God within it.

What should our test be? If we look at our text, it seems that we have to grapple both individually and in community, and to speak our truth.

Now, here's a hard truth about this process. It doesn't always go as easily as it did in Acts 11 – a lot of times it is messy. In fact, this story in Acts is not the end of the story about Gentiles, it will come again to the leaders in Jerusalem, and they will have to grapple again with how the Spirit is leading them.

That can be a lesson for us too. If people are speaking out of their experience, well, sometimes those experiences are in direct opposition to each other. That will require a lot of listening, a lot of breaking bread together, understanding that we each want to understand what God is doing, even as we have different experiences of it.

But if we are really open to that wind of the Holy Spirit, I can imagine a time, years down the road, when this community looks back, and sees in retrospect that this time of stretching helped God's work in the world for a new day, and that the stretch of today is simply part of what's normal for God's church in the world.

Let's not be afraid to stretch, and to share our experiences of God.

Amen.