

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“A BROKEN PARADIGM”

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TEXT: Acts 11:1-18

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When a paradigm is broken, people get nervous. When someone challenges our normal understanding of life, it can be painful.

I'm talking about little paradigms as well as big ones. For example, I used to love the card catalogue at the library. If you are under the age of 30, you may not know what a card catalogue is, but for us “old people” (over 30!) the card catalogue was our doorway into the realm of knowledge. There were tens of thousands of little index cards in file drawers, and when you wanted to know anything about any book in the library, all you had to do was flip through the cards – manually. It worked, sort of. And then one day there was shocking news from the library: “No more little cards. We now have computers.” I said: “What? But I like the little cards.” They explained to me the advantages of a computer: access to dozens of libraries; up-to-the-minute information about every book (is it on the shelf or not?). But I was attached to the old paradigm, even though it was obsolete. I grumbled, and I pouted, until finally, I caught on to the new paradigm.

Think about what happens when a big paradigm is broken. For example: “The sun revolves around the planet Earth.” That was a commonly accepted fact, until Copernicus and Galileo came along and said, “No, the Earth is not the center of the universe.” (We know now that our sun is one of more than a hundred billion suns in the Milky Way galaxy!) It was a radically new paradigm initiated by Copernicus and Galileo, a new understanding of the universe resisted by many devout Christians. When an old paradigm becomes obsolete, people get nervous.

No wonder the leaders of the early church were upset with Peter. Peter was saying that the old paradigm was broken, the belief that to be chosen and loved by God, you had to belong to Abraham's family. You had to be scrupulous in following the law of Moses. If you were a Gentile, you had to convert to Judaism, or else you were out of luck. Gentiles were considered heathens, unloved and unblessed by the Holy One of Israel.

Jesus, of course, had challenged the old paradigm. Jesus had said that no one puts old wine in new wineskins (Matthew 9:17). The new wine of God's salvation is available for everyone, according to Jesus, and so the old wineskins, the old paradigm of the law, had to be replaced. His message made the defenders of the law nervous and angry. Angry enough to have him crucified.

Meanwhile, Peter was caught between the old paradigm (God's love is for the chosen people only) and the new paradigm (God's love is for all people, including tax collectors and harlots and Gentiles). Peter had been with Jesus for three years, but he was stuck in the old worldview: children of Abraham, yes; children of Rome, no.

And then it happened. Peter was jolted into the new paradigm of Jesus. Even though he was slow at times (like us), even though he was dull at times (like us), one day he “got it.” How? He had a vision of animals, animals considered clean and unclean by the law of Moses. In the vision he was told: “Peter, you can enjoy all of the animals.” “No, Lord,” he replied, “my lips have never touched anything unclean.” “You’re not listening, Peter. You can enjoy all of the animals.” He continued to protest, and so the message came a third time: “Come on, Peter. All of them are clean.” At that very moment there was a knock on the door. Three men had come from 30 miles away to invite Peter into the home of Cornelius, a Roman soldier considered to be an enemy of God’s people. According to the old paradigm, Romans were off limits. Romans were anathema. But the vision of the animals had blasted Peter into a new paradigm, a new way of understanding God’s mercy. Peter accepted the invitation to fraternize with the so-called enemy, and for the first time ever, an “unclean” Gentile was baptized.

Is there anybody in your world that you consider unclean, unworthy of your compassion? Are there people you have no use for? Someone who belongs to the wrong political party. Someone who speaks with an accent. Someone whose lifestyle is contrary to your own convictions. Someone who talks too much or who seems excessively introverted. Someone who has no use for church or religion. Someone who has injured you in the past. The old paradigm says: “God’s love is for *our* kind of people. God’s love is for those who do what’s right according to *our* standards.” But the new paradigm of Jesus, the new paradigm that made Peter nervous at first, says: “God loves us, not because we are good, but rather, we can learn to be good because we are loved by God, without distinction.”

It’s what we call the good news, and it changes the way we treat people. Why? Because what God says to you and me, God says to everyone: “All are welcome in the house of the Lord.”

My daughter sent me an email, which could be sent to everyone on this planet. It began with these words: “If God had a refrigerator, your picture is on it.” It’s a new paradigm. Praise God!