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Peter Didn't Follow the Vegas Rules

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

"At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

As we continue to celebrate the season of Easter, we continue to look at ordinary people in the book of Acts and how they practice resurrection. Resurrection is more than just an event, but a lifelong invitation to practice. Last week, we heard about how Tabitha practiced resurrection by seeing the widows in need, just as God sees us. This week, we turn to Peter.

There are some things that have sunk so deeply into our cultural consciousness that it seems like they have always been there. They are some of the timeless truths. Based on our Gospel reading today, you might think that I am thinking of "Love one another as I have loved you," but this morning I'm thinking of something else...

What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.

It has inspired songs and movies. It has become a shorthand way to ask for confidentiality, employing "Vegas rules." It sounds like something from a bygone era before cell phones and social media, so I was surprised to learn that phrase is only about 20 years old - coming from a Las Vegas tourism campaign in the early 2000's. Perhaps it feels so timeless because it puts words to our desires to keep parts of our lives separate, that it is okay not to share everything.

Sometimes we live by Vegas rules because we want to keep things private. Sometimes it is because we are afraid of repercussions, other times it is simply because we don't know how to share what is going on.

I remember when I was thirteen years old. My dad had been laid off from his job. I was struggling with what that meant, knowing that we would probably be moving away when he found a new job, and I didn't know how to talk to my friends about any of this. Dads' jobs were not something we talked about, we just took them for granted, so I just didn't say anything. Finally, one afternoon, a friend called me after school to check on a homework assignment and my dad answered the phone. Not knowing, she asked me what he was doing at home because her dad was still at work. I stammered through an explanation...oh, I must not have told you...um, by the way, uh...yeah...my dad no longer has a job.

Some of these things don't get much easier even when you are older. It can be hard to share your grief because a loved one is sick or has died to people who don't know who you are talking about.

Or sometimes, it's when you have extremely good news, while those around you mourn. Or how do you share your own successes in another part of your life without sounding like you're boasting? Sometimes, it's just easier to play by the Vegas rules.

This brings us to Peter today. Peter knew what was up. He was among the ones who led this fledgling Christ-movement. Remember Jesus said to Simon, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18) Peter was among the leaders in Jerusalem and he knew how things worked.

Jesus was a Jew. The disciples he had chosen were Jews. Those who received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost - yep, those were Jews too. The early Christians, the followers of the Way, were simply a smaller subset of Judaism. And one thing was sure - they were not Gentiles and they did not eat with Gentiles because, among other things, Gentiles ate all sorts of things that were considered unclean and the risk of cross-contamination was too high.

So, Peter had this vision and he knew it was from the Lord. He had learned that the Holy Spirit was often unpredictable, upending the way things were, hovering over the waters of creation, falling in the disciples at Pentecost, making them speak so that everyone could understand them. When Peter went to Caesarea, he began to teach and saw that these Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit, so of course he stayed with them.

He said to them, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him...Can anyone withhold

the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:34-35, 47)

Later, as Peter headed back to Jerusalem, I wonder if he thought about what he would tell the others. In some ways, I am sure Peter was tempted to play by the Vegas rules - you know, what happened in Caesarea stays in Caesarea.

He had a role as a leader, but he broke the rules by staying with Gentiles. And even more, his actions - and the Holy Spirit's actions - challenged their understanding of who was part of this Jesus-movement.

I can imagine his internal dialogue: Gentiles were not part of God's people, so they weren't *supposed* to receive the Holy Spirit and they definitely were not to be baptized and be joined in fellowship...but *these* Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, so surely they were acceptable before God. But there were so many other questions - was it just these Gentiles, or all Gentiles? Are you sure it was the Holy Spirit? Even so, why would did you stay with them?

As Peter returned to Jerusalem, I can see him wondering how to put the lid back on the can of worms, how to close Pandora's box. As much as Peter may have wanted to play by the Vegas rules and keep these events to himself so no one questioned his leadership, the word got out.

The Holy Spirit continued to move, spreading the good news about what had happened in Caesarea. And so faced with the decision of whether to own his actions or distance himself from what happened, Peter practiced resurrection by proclaiming what God had done. Peter shared the Good News - not just the Good News about Jesus' life, death and resurrection, but about how the Holy Spirit continued to move and work, blowing through the church and the world, challenging boundaries and expanding the welcome.

As we, the people of St Thomas Lutheran Church in Bloomington, Indiana, hear this story from Acts, it would be tempting for us to pat ourselves on the back.

We have been a Reconciling in Christ congregation from the beginning, affirming the gifts of LGBTQIA+ folks among us.

We continue to do the work, having recently convened a Diversity taskforce to evaluate how well we welcome people of diverse backgrounds, audit our welcome statement and participate in training with Stone Belt Arc.

For us, there is no question. We have seen the gifts to the church that come with expanding boundaries. We have seen how the Holy Spirit can move when all people are welcome to use their gifts in the body of Christ. And we know that, when Jesus said to love one another, he meant all people. That, when it comes to the Holy Spirit, "All means all" with no asterisk - there are no exceptions to all, that the Spirit always pushes the church into greater practice of God's love for all people of the world.

Without a doubt, God is doing great things here - in our lives and in our gatherings.

But I come back to the question, what if Peter didn't tell anyone? What if he had decided to play by Vegas rules. If the Christian circle had not been expanded to include Gentiles, most of us would be living very different lives today. Many of us would not be gathered here for worship, we would not know the power of the resurrection in our lives, the joy of being freed from the power of sin and death and freed for the life of the world.

So how do we, like Peter, practice resurrection by telling the Good News of what the Holy Spirit is up to among us? While we know that all people are welcome, who needs to hear that Good News?

The Holy Spirit that is at work in pushing boundaries and expanding welcome is also at work in us as we share that Good News.

Acts (1:8) opens with a promise from Jesus that the Holy Spirit will come and empower us to be witnesses of the Good News. Throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit is leading folks into situations where they can proclaim the Good News and then giving them the words they need, just as the Holy Spirit filled Peter as he defended their preaching to the rulers, scribes and elders at the temple in Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit is the one who moves others, who brings them to faith. The Holy Spirit is the one who can take our simple invitation to "come and see" and grow it into more.

But it can be hard to let the Holy Spirit guide our conversations.

There is a saying, *falsely* attributed to St Francis of Assisi: Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary. I don't know about you, but I am drawn to it - while it can be hard to faithfully live a life that reflects the transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ, I like the idea that I don't have to say anything. It feels like a relief, yet Francis was also known for his preaching.

Jesus' last words to his disciples in the Gospel according to Matthew included, "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and *teaching* them." Words and actions are not a dichotomy - our actions need to align with our words, but words are also necessary to share about the Word-made-flesh to dwell among us.

As Jesus tells us to baptize and teach, he promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age. We are not alone, but empowered by the gift of the Spirit to speak of the work of God. We practice resurrection when we proclaim what God has done - and continues to do among us today.

Let's share the good news of what is happening here, so that "What happens at St Thomas DOES NOT stay at St Thomas." Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit within us, let us proclaim the good things that God has done, in our lives and in our midst, so that all people may come to know the power of the Holy Spirit, of transformation and resurrection in their own lives. Amen.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Easter 5C