**Communities in Transition**

By Julian Forth

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Text: Acts 11:1-18

*Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters 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 he 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.”*

In 1619, the first Africans brought by European slave traders stepped foot on the American mainland in Virginia. These twenty or so Africans had survived the watery abyss of the middle passage and now stood on strange soil and at the cusp of a strange new world. With dread and fear, they undoubtedly wondered what society were they being brought into? How would they survive? What future could they possibly have here?

In 1945, during World War II, the United States detonated nuclear weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki which leveled both cities and killed up to 200,000 people. The new weapon enacted a bloodless, cold, new form of violence unlike anything the world had witnessed before. Suddenly, all of humankind faced a future where it's self-annihilation was not only possible, but imminent and easy. What new era of war lay ahead? Will humankind have a future? How have the stakes of international relations changed?

In 1969, in New York City, police conducted one of the regular raids of the queer bar and night club, the Stonewall Inn. The cops surveilled and arrested patrons who did not dress, love, or play as the law dictated. But that particular night, the patrons fought back with bricks and overturned cars in defiance of state violence. For the rioters and for queer and trans folks around the world, this was a watershed moment. But, what would come of it? What will become of queer and trans after this? What will this mean for our communities?

In 1980, my family immigrated from Jamaica. My mother and father grew up in small country towns. They were close to their siblings and parents, they loved their college friends and the life they had built, but they saw better opportunities in the United States. Moving to the States, however, entailed the difficulty of leaving the people, culture, and life they loved. As they got off the plane, they undoubtedly wondered what life awaited them in the United States. What would they gain? What would they mourn?

And today, in 2022, *Roe v Wade* is at risk of being overturned, putting into jeopardy access to safe abortions for millions of mostly low-income people. Many states are already poised with laws that will go into effect if and when the federal ruling is overturned. In some cases, abortion will not only be inaccessible but also criminalized. We are teetering on the edge of changing an almost fifty-year ruling. What will happen to the women, people, and families lacking access to reproductive care? How will we take care of each other? Is there still time to change the outcome?

I name these as landmark events — these global, racial, national, or even personal and intimate events — because these are historic moments when we notice a community in transition. These are all events where we can feel and sense a community being pulled between a familiar past and an unknown, emerging future. A community in moment suspended between what has been and what is to come. I'll come back to this, but let's first turn to our scripture passage for today.

In Acts 10, a Gentile in Cesarea, Cornelius, received a message from an angel telling Cornelius to invite Peter to Cornelius's home. While Cornelius's servants were enroute to find Peter in Joppa, Peter was on the roof praying. While praying, he received a vision wherein God presented Peter with a variety of animals, many that were traditionally understood to be unclean according to Jewish law. The voice commands Peter to kill and eat, but Peter, in typical fashion, protests, saying no, "he has never eaten anything unclean." The vision occurs three times and leaves Peter confused. Just then, Cornelius's servants arrived. Peter gave the weary travelers lodging and the next day returned with them to Cornelius's home in Cesarea.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius's home, he found a large group eager to hear from him. And while Peter was preaching the message of Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles in the same way it had done on the day of Pentecost.

Interestingly, our passage for today is not Acts 10, but Acts 11. In our reading today, Peter is not in Cesarea, he is in Jerusalem. He is sharply confronted by the believers in Jerusalem for eating and sharing with Gentiles. And, there, at the church in Jerusalem, with other Jewish followers of Christ, Peter recounts **everything** that had happened in Acts 10: the angel to Cornelius, the three visions at Joppa, the time at Cornelius's home, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles. The believers at Jerusalem are baffled: non-Jewish followers of Jesus? Is such a thing possible? How?

Let's slow down to appreciate the levels of repetition here. In Acts 10, Peter experiences a vision three times, then the whole content of what just happened in Acts 10 is retold in detail in Acts 11 to the believers in Jerusalem. The writer of Acts could simply have said, "Peter told them all that had happened," but instead the writer of Acts is at pains to detail *again* what was just explained a few paragraphs ago. (And at this time in history, writing and paper is not cheap.) Why all this repetition?

In his commentary on Acts, Willie Jennings is right when he states that the repetition is *emphatic*, "but more importantly [the author of Acts] does it to show the breaking open of a life, Peter's life, and to show the breaking open of a people's life, Israel's life." That is, Acts 11:1-8 is not so much about the events at Cornelius's home but about:

1. Peter's experience of Cornelius's home,
2. the invitation for the church at Jerusalem to know and embrace what happened at Cornelius's home, and
3. the capacity for this event to reshape the story of the Jewish people.

Acts 11 is not about Cornelius's home, but it's about a community in transition, suspended between the tradition they knew and an emerging future.

I know this passage is being preached out of order with the Church calendar. It's Easter and Pentecost is still a few weeks away. I want to step back once again to remind ourselves that in Acts, the Holy Spirit is the protagonist, not the church or the apostles. In western churches, the Holy Spirit has consistently been sidelined, marginalized, and a footnote in our theology, liturgy, ministry, and practice. In 381, the council at Constantinople, affirmed the full divinity of the Holy Spirit and their equality with the Father and the Son in the life of the Trinity. The Spirit is not a less being, but is true God, period.

Moreover, I want to suggest that the Spirit is not just the protagonist in the book of Acts, but also in God’s work in the world:

The Spirit created from the dark and deep waters in the book of Genesis.   
The Spirit gave word and wisdom to the Hebrew prophets.   
The Spirit joined with Mary to make the incarnation possible, the unthinkable union of God and human life in her womb,  
The Spirit is the power of Jesus’s ministry as the Messiah  
The Spirit raised Jesus from the dead  
And the Spirit is the very gift of salvation which is then passed on to us.

***Just as much as Jesus gives the Spirit to the church, it is the Spirit that gives us Jesus, the prophets, and communion with God in history.***

Maybe the Spirit gets the short end of the stick because they seem to lack a personable figure. The Spirit is never presented as a person, a face, a body, but as wind, fire, or a dove. I used to think these images were impoverished descriptors of the Spirit, but maybe it’s good corrective to our all-too-human, anthropological concepts of God. Sure, God is personal, but God is rightly impersonal, God is a force that is cosmic, elemental, animal, and dynamic. The Spirit is absolutely a “she,” but also wonderfully a “they” and an “it.”

And even though the Spirit is always present from the first pages of Genesis, and even though the Spirit is always present with the church in Acts, it becomes palpable here in Acts 11 when Peter is speaking to the church in Jerusalem. The Spirit is palpable right when the community of believers feels itself in transition, right when the church is undergoing transition and is suspended between the familiar past and an emerging future.

Willie Jennings explains that through Peter’s testimony, the believers and Peter are “dangling between the past and the future with no ground to stand on expect the ground created by the Spirit of God,” (118). The believers in Jerusalem are left silent by Peter’s testimony. Again, Jennings writes that “Peter brings them to the break, but the Spirit of God carries the time, holding it in the silence,” (118). The past is receding and the future is emerging, but neither is fully here. And the present is only a moment of groundless suspension between the two. In Jennings’s commentary on this passage, he wants to hold together the past and future, to carry both of them at once. I could almost feel the tension in his words, as he, like the church in Jerusalem, is trying to hold the past and the future together.

In our own time, the past and the future remain powerful and defining concepts for national, local, and familial communities. Those who are inclined toward the past might tend toward *nostalgia*: a longing for better times, trust the reliability of what has always been, seeing recent societal developments as regrettable degradations and forgetting that the good days where only good for some. Those who are inclined toward the future tend toward *neophilia*(I totally just looked that word up): a love for the newest idea, practices, and things, confidence in progress: that the latest innovation will correct the errors of the past, yet not seeing how some new things can also create new or worse problems and ignoring the resources the past has to address problems today. Suspended between the past and future, there are no easy answers and no guarantees.

How were Africans to survive on the American continent? What will come of a world full of nuclear weaponry? How will queer and trans liberation unfold? What life will an immigrant family find in their new home? And, palpably for us, what will happen if and when Roe v Wade is overturned? Even though all of these changes point to particular dates, landmark events, and notable turning points, the truth is that communities are always in transition. Each new generation, new member, new technological innovation, reveals a community at odds with itself in more or less noticeable ways. Neither longing for the past nor throwing ourselves toward the future is an always-reliable answer. These events and more all require careful discernment and responsibility in the abyss, the groundlessness of the present moment.

Turning back to the book of Acts, what happens in Acts 10 and retold in Acts 11 is part of an unfolding question for the community of believers. Gentiles participating in the kingdom of God is no easy matter. The community cannot find a basis in the tradition yet it is faced with the events at Cornelius’s house and Peter’s testimony. This tension culminates in Acts 15 when the very first church council is held to help answer challenging questions facing the community. In Acts 15, after much debate, questioning, arguing, they agree to allow the new Gentile believers to remain among the church and not to impose too many burdens on them. The church decides, the church acts in the groundlessness of the present when they say, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” (Acts 15:28). Who knows what the future will offer, who knows what this decision will eventually yield, who knows if this is right or wrong, but it *seems* good to us and to the Holy Spirit and, with that, we move courageously toward what’s to come.

One particular example of a moment of transition where I find some hope today is the renewed interest in socialism, labor, and worker’s rights. The ravages of capitalism have immiserated workers, dispossessed communities, multiplied crushing debt, and coupled the threat of nuclear annihilation with ecological disaster. And yet, for so long the language of socialism and the role of labor movements in capitalist society had fallen from view among activists. But due to the financial crash in 2008, the Occupy movement, and organizing about student debt, the language of socialism has emerged among activists, organizers, and everyday folks. The recent unions at Amazon warehouses, Starbucks, and other industries are part of the growing force of socialism. And this is happening just as much in the Church as elsewhere. Christians are starting to reclaim the term socialism as part of what our faith demands.

This renewed interest is an emerging future, indeed. And, yet, it is also tradition. After all, Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Paul Tillich, James Cone, Karl Barth, Gustavo Gutierrez, Liberation Theology, Dorothee Sollee, the Catholic Worker Movement, and so many others all wear the name of socialist. But this, too, is a shift that calls churches to join hands with workers like The Festival Center has done in supporting a bill to provide for excluded workers in DC. Other resources are the Magnificast Podcast and the Institute for Christian Socialism.

Our communities, our churches, our neighborhoods are in transitions. How do we hold to the past and the future at the same time? What will come from these changes? How do we bear anxiety and possibilities of living in the groundless present?

None of these has easy answers. However, this is when God’s ever-present Spirit becomes palpable. There are no easy answers because the work of God in history is not a riddle but a story that comes into existence and grows each moment. Through discernment, trying, debate, struggle, building, taking chances, failing, resting, and trying again, the Spirit accompanies our communities in transition.