

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 2, 2010 (Easter 5, Year C)

It's hard to miss the fact that it's political season in Hingham. In yesterday's election there were candidates running for selectman and school board and planning commission and even the sewer commission – though I would prefer not to see *that* job description. Lawn signs of every color have sprung up all over town – lots of reds, blues, whites, and greens. When I drive down Main Street I feel like I'm in the middle of a life-sized game of Candyland (beware of Lord Licorice). And it's good that so many people are engaged in the process; that civic life is taken so seriously; that dialogue and respectful debate are cherished values. I just never realized that the dump would be such a hotbed of political activity.

But, as often happens in politics, there's a shadow side to all of the color and drama. Advocates of one position or one candidate sometimes trivialize or even demonize those with whom they disagree. Experience shows that at least as much mud gets slung on the local as the national level – and it's often nastier and more personal when we disagree with our neighbors.

Having opinions is good. But not leaving room for the possibility that your own perspective may not be complete leaves us blind to new possibilities and opportunities and outcomes.

This was certainly the case with Peter and his attitude toward the Gentiles in the Book of Acts. At this point Peter was pretty confident in his ministry of spreading the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. He was the senior apostle, the one of whom Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church" – which is pretty heady stuff. Peter had the whole thing figured out and was quite certain that Jesus came only to the circumcised – to the Jews of 1st century Palestine. So it was in this particular community that Peter spent his time preaching and healing and teaching. And it was a fruitful, albeit targeted, ministry.

Then there was Paul, the other heavyweight of the early Church – we heard about his dramatic conversion on the Road to Damascus a couple of weeks ago. He began spreading the gospel to the uncircumcised – to the Gentiles. Which for the Jewish Christians was nothing short of scandalous. And thus the first church controversy erupted. Isn't it somehow comforting that Christians have been fighting among themselves for over 2,000 years? Church conflict is nothing new.

So there were two sides to this debate with passions running high. Both sides' positions were well-entrenched. I was at the annual diocesan clergy conference for a couple of days this past week and the main speaker was Ray Suarez of NPR and PBS fame. He's a devout Episcopalian, by the way; a parishioner and former vestry member at St. Columba's in Washington, DC. One of the things he warned us about was the danger of becoming the "Church of the Made-Up Mind." In other words, it's not healthy to shun those with whom we disagree; it's a close-minded posture that shuts down communication and breaks up community. And that really resonated with me both in the context of the issues surrounding the national Episcopal Church and this early Church controversy. Both Peter and Paul came into this situation believing that he was right; their minds were made up. But by continuing to remain in conversation they left an opening for God.

And by doing so, an amazing thing happens to Peter along the way. He has this vision in which he saw all sorts of animals – all of them quite literally un-kosher and forbidden for Jews to eat. And he hears a voice commanding “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.” And he protests as any good Jewish Christian would have saying, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” The vision recurs along with a voice that proclaims, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

And through Peter’s vision, a new vision of God is broken open right before Peter’s very eyes. The community that God forms through Jesus Christ is not about who’s in and who’s out; who’s clean and who’s unclean; who’s sacred and who’s profane. The God in whom we live and move and have our being is welcoming and inclusive and loving and inviting. This is a God who breaks down the barriers of mistrust and judgmentalism and otherness that exist between fellow children of God. There are no limits on God’s love – it is all-encompassing, all-abounding, all-inclusive.

And as certain as Peter is of the righteousness of his original position, he leaves room for God. Now, it wasn’t easy for him to get to this point – being open to the moving of the Holy Spirit can be quite challenging. It means tossing aside our preconceived notions and remembering that God’s will is more important than our own. And remember, Peter had to see this vision three times before it finally took. But by being open to another perspective he comes to understand that Jesus came into the world to redeem all people not just a small group of them.

One of the most contentious issues around here has been over putting lights on the Ward Street fields – quite literally a turf war, as part of the proposal is to put down artificial turf. All you have to do is pick up the Hingham Journal and start reading the letters to the editor to see how much passion exists on both sides of the issue. Tomorrow night’s Town Meeting should be interesting. And in some ways, how great is it to live in a community where lights on an athletic field seem to be our biggest problem? We only have to be concerned with whether or not to light a lacrosse field. We don’t have to worry about roach infested schools or prostitution in the streets or the fact that a huge percentage of the world will go to bed hungry tonight. Or do we?

With parishioners passionate on both sides of the lighting issue, I’m politically savvy enough not to wade into *that* from the pulpit. I’m simply calling for a little perspective. When you sit with a young man fighting cancer, your perspective can’t help but change; when you go down and help out at a feeding program in Boston, your perspective can’t help but change; when you sit with a grieving friend, your perspective can’t help but change.

Peter’s perspective needed to change in order for him to grasp the fullness of God’s love. And ours sometimes does as well. We are all blessed to live here; blessed to have an open form of government. But, please, let’s keep it all in perspective.