

5 Easter – Year C – May 2, 2010
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
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Have you ever heard of Reggie Dabbs? Up until a few days ago, I'd never heard of Reggie Dabbs either. The beginnings of his story are far from unique, but his life is now a testament to faithful living, and what a difference our choices make. Dabbs often says, "You can't change your past, but you can change your future." Wise words indeed. Dabbs was born in Louisiana to an unmarried teenager. As Dabbs tells the story, his mother was desperate and then "she remembered a former school teacher, Mrs. Dabbs, who had said to her students, 'If you ever need anything, call me,' giving them her phone number. The young woman called. Mrs. Dabbs and her husband picked up the pregnant teenager, and cared for her until after the baby was born. They continued to care for Reggie as foster parents, before officially adopting him. As they reared Reggie, they ingrained in him the fact that in every situation he faced, he had a choice. What he did with those choices was up to him."

The word conversion comes from the Latin to turn around. The choices we make every day are our moment-by-moment turning points or conversions. Some are more momentous than others, like making the choice to love or forgive, rather than let anger and resentment fester and grow. Or the choice to put the needs of others before ourselves, rather than living in a self-centered cocoon. Sometimes we don't even recognize how significant a choice is until events unfold and we take the time to reflect on how God is working in our lives. Who knows if the believers in Jerusalem knew how significant their choice was going to be. There is no doubt that it had become imperative that the early followers of the Way answer the questions, "Who are we as the church? Is the good news of Jesus Christ really for the gentiles too?" As a church that is now predominantly comprised of gentile Christians, you and I can look back in wonder at this turning point in our history. It's no small matter to realize that the early Christian church was a sect within Judaism and the majority of believers in Christ at that time were Jewish. In the luxury of our privileged majority position, we have become accustomed to thinking of ourselves as "insiders", so it's jarring to realize that we were "outsiders" at this point in the history of Christianity. "Us" originally meant being a Jewish believer in Jesus Christ. "Them" meant being a gentile.

"Life is a roller coaster. Sometimes you're at the top of the hill feeling good. Other times you're heading for the bottom feeling totally out of control. Life is full of things that are hard to handle, but you can get through them," says Dabbs. The operative word here is 'control', and especially the hard realization of Who is really in control. Peter is called to account in Jerusalem for dining with gentiles. It doesn't seem like a big deal to you or me, yet dietary laws are a big part of Jewish identity. This is also an issue of survival for the Jewish community, maintaining obedience to the Law, and resisting idolatrous worship. The dietary laws define which foods are clean. Peter has been called to explain why he ate with gentiles, described in the reading as "the uncircumcised", simply because the pagan practices of gentiles, including sacrificing food to idols, were considered a serious threat to the Jewish community's worship of Yahweh, the one true God, as well as God's laws in the Hebrew Scriptures.

To put it into modern terms, we all have religious practices and values that we hold sacrosanct. It is deeply offensive to us when someone intrudes upon, tramples over, or badmouths what we hold so close to our hearts. Let's all bear in mind that there is a very thin line marking the edges of the path of close-minded rigidity on one side, and a kind of *laissez-faire*, anything goes attitude on the other. The classic Anglican *via media* or middle way, honors scripture, tradition, reason and experience, with a healthy flexibility, room for growth, and openness to the often-surprising movement of the Holy Spirit. Without compromising the foundational doctrines of our faith, there is a spirit of generosity that embraces difference as a means to growth, and constantly seeks to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us. Faith is never static; it is dynamic and transformational. In Paul's first letter to the church in

Corinth we read, "Love does not insist on its own way... but rejoices in the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:5, 6). Love says, "we know only in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9). This kind of loving openness is precisely what we see in this story from Acts.

Peter does not try to defend his actions, rationalize what has happened, or even explain it. He simply tells a powerful story with three distinct elements. The first part is a vision from God with a revelation of what God deems clean. In prayerful reflection, Peter discerns what the Holy Spirit is calling him to do; connecting the vision to a new understanding that God shows no partiality. Finally, an angelic message leads him to the gentile family where he witnesses to Christ, and sees the gift of the Holy Spirit fall upon those who believe in the Lord. His openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit is remarkable; given how hard it must have been for him to experience the invitation to eat of food he thought of as unclean. Peter's experience of seeing the Holy Spirit fall upon the gentiles brings him to a turning point as he testifies before the believers in Jerusalem, "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?" Ultimately, Peter's turning point becomes a story of conversion for the whole community of faith. The Body of Christ discerns God's new call together. In our radical modern independence, you and I may have become uncomfortable sharing our stories and seeking discernment as a community. One of the exercises at the spring vestry retreat was to share the gifts we bring as leaders in this parish, and look at how much we need one another in order to discern where God is calling us.

Peter received the gift of a divine wake-up call concerning them and us. Every one of us has to deal with the baggage of life, including the people and events that have shaped us, as well as those that have left calluses in our hearts and minds. These hard spots are our biases and prejudices. In order to find healing and continue growing, we must face who or what we hold to be "unclean": those we consider outsiders. Is it the faceless Wall St. bankers who pocketed thousands of dollars in bonuses, even as we watched our own savings evaporate? What about welfare recipients who so often seem to have money for cigarettes and a six-pack? Is it the guy up the street who always seems to park his junker of a truck right behind our well-kept vehicle? Perhaps it's someone who simply looks or sounds different than we do. The Body of Christ is no stranger to challenges in our interpretation of scripture, our traditions and values, our intellectual pride, or even our own experiences that speak to the work of the Holy Spirit amongst us. How often do we resist the vision; wrestle with the still small voice of the Holy Spirit or dismiss God's messengers, and God's intended message? We have a choice.

The good news is that Jesus' life, death and resurrection inaugurates a new period in the history of God's steadfast love for humanity and all creation. It is a period marked by "interior compassion for everyone, not external compliance to [an immovable wall of tradition. It is a new age characterized] by radical inclusivity rather than by hierarchical exclusivity, and by inward transformation rather than by outward ritual" (Dan Clendenin). In place of the Levitical commandment to "be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), says Marcus Borg, Jesus deliberately substitutes the call to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). People like Reggie Dabbs live out the good news. Dabbs has become a popular public school speaker. He talks to the kids about the choices each of them face, especially with respect to drugs, alcohol, even suicide. He drives home the fact that they can't change the past, but their future is a choice. From his own humble beginnings as an unwed teenager's problem, Dabbs now saves lives, helping teenagers meet their problems head-on. Dabbs is a witness to the power of conversion and the choices that make an eternal difference. Our turning points shape the practice of God's graciousness in this community of faith. What Peter shares is a moment of conversion that realizes the beginning of God's plan for all to be reconciled to Him in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Open our hearts and minds, renew us, and grant us all the repentance that leads to life.

Amen.