

“What the Church Can Learn from Star Trek”

I wasn't sure which reading to use as my preaching text this week.  
I always start by looking at the gospel, but nothing in that really jumped out at me.  
So I read the first lesson in Acts and that grabbed my heart, but I know there are people here who don't like it  
when I talk about people building relationship with people who are different from us and so I was hesitant.

I went on the Luther Seminary podcast to hear the commentaries on the four lessons,  
and one of the presenters said, “Well, here are my thoughts on the gospel,  
but if I were preaching I would preach on Acts...”  
and then they went on to the psalm and she said, “Well, here are my thoughts on the psalm,  
but if I were preaching I would preach on Acts...”  
and then when they got to the epistle, she said, “Well, here's what I think about Revelation,  
but if I were preaching I would preach on Acts...”  
So I'm thinking that maybe I should preach on Acts, but I was still afraid.

And then I got this week's email blast and Karl usually puts in something about the gospel,  
but this week he had put in something about Acts!  
And what he put in was so insightful that I emailed him back and said,  
“Guess I don't have to write a sermon this week – I'll just read what you wrote!  
I don't know if you read the email blast for this week, but whether you did or didn't,  
I want to re-read a little bit of it for you.  
He begins by talking about an episode in Star Trek in which an enemy or friend was determined  
by which side of their face was white and which was black.  
And then it goes on to say that as human beings we are always trying to determine who's in and who's out,  
that “Maybe this tendency dates back to prehistoric times  
when humans had to decide quickly who was friend and who was foe”  
and that maybe it's the way we justify and label ourselves as “better”.

What I found so insightful about these words was that it is true about every single one of us.  
No matter how liberal, or how progressive, or how open-minded,  
or how hospitable, or how welcoming we think we are,  
our identity goes so deep into our subconscious that we are not even aware when we are drawing lines.  
As the email blast points out, Peter viewed himself as a faithful Jew –  
circumcised, always eating the right things, and avoiding anything unclean or profane.  
Peter was certainly not aware that he was drawing a line.  
He was simply a Jewish man who had been taught the law  
and knew what he was supposed to do and what he was supposed not to do.  
And God knew that Peter knew the rules.  
God understood that Peter was operating inside those humanly constructed boundaries –  
without even being aware that that was what he was doing.  
But God had more in mind for Peter – God's mission for Peter went beyond those boundaries.  
And so to prepare Peter for that mission, God sent a vision,  
a vision in which Peter was commanded to eat things that no observant Jew would ever eat.  
In the vision Peter refuses,  
The entire vision is repeated and then repeated again.  
And as soon as the vision is over, 3 men knock at his door  
and ask him to come to the house of a Gentile, and God instructs Peter to obey.  
While God was preparing Peter, God was also preparing the Gentiles  
who were instructed by an angel to go and get Peter.  
And that's how Peter and his Jewish comrades end up eating with Gentiles  
and getting into trouble for crossing racial and religious boundaries.  
Peter says to those who criticize him, “Who was I that I could hinder God?”

I found myself asking that same question years ago.  
It was back when I was serving at Tabor and was at an ecumenical pastors' gathering  
and we were discussing Eucharistic hospitality, i.e., how open or closed our communion tables were.  
I happened to be very proud of how open we were at Tabor!  
Not only did we give a choice of wine or grape juice,  
not only did we give a choice of a regular wafer or a gluten-free wafer,  
not only did we give a choice of common cup or individual glasses, we had no age limit.  
You didn't have to wait until you were in second grade or third or fourth grade  
and had received communion instruction in order to take the sacrament.  
I was very proud. Until my Methodist colleague asked, "But you only commune the baptized?"  
And my first response was, "Well, of course".  
It had never crossed my mind to commune the unbaptized. I had never even thought about that.  
And my colleague went on to say, "That's interesting, because Wesley says that God can work  
through the sacrament of communion to convert a person & make them desire baptism."  
And it was like a light bulb went on in my brain and I thought, "Of course! God is God!  
And God can do anything God wants!  
And so if God wants to convert somebody through the sacrament of Holy Communion,  
who am I to stand in the way? Who am I to hinder God?"  
And I went back to Tabor and I took that part about being baptized right out of the bulletin!  
I have been drawing a line between the baptized and the unbaptized & I hadn't even realized it!  
That's how deep our sense of identity goes.  
That's how deep our assumptions go. That's how deep our fears of the other go.

I used to draw another line.  
I remember at a council meeting – maybe 6 or 7 years ago –  
when someone said, "Pastor I drive past Black Rock Congregational every week  
and their parking lot is full! What are they doing that we're not?"  
And my answer was, "Well... We're NOT like them!  
The people that go to that kind of church want simplistic answers.  
They want to know that things are either right or wrong  
and there's no room in between to deal with the complexities of real life.  
They're judgmental and narrow-minded and that's why people go there."  
Of course I had never been there myself,  
but that's what I had been taught and that's what I accepted at face value as true.  
I was very quick to judge.

Then just last week I was at a gathering of the New Haven Lutheran pastors  
and someone was talking about a church similar to Black Rock  
and the pastor next to me said almost the identical thing I said 6 or 7 years ago,  
i.e., "Well, it's their narrow doctrines that attract people."<sup>0</sup>  
And I said, "You know, that's exactly what I used to think, but I discovered I was wrong.  
I spent my sabbatical visiting those kinds of churches  
and I hardly ever heard anything political or conservative or judgmental or narrow-minded at their worship.  
I am sure that those kinds of things are discussed in Bible studies or in other ways,  
but that's not why people worship there.  
What I found in their worship was an incredible sense of joy.  
What I found in their worship was an enthusiasm and excitement about encountering the living God.  
What I found were people who maybe didn't know the love of God in the way I knew it,  
but who knew the power of God in a way I didn't.  
Let's face it, if you have power and privilege & safety & comfort in society, you don't really need a God of power.  
But if you face discrimination and oppression and threats to your safety every day  
because you are black or brown or because you are gay or lesbian, or because you are poor or you are disabled,  
or for any other reason, you need a God of power, and you come to know and trust that God of power,  
and you come to worship to celebrate that God of power!

I, like most Lutheran pastors, had drawn a line between Evangelicals and mainline Protestants  
and in so doing I cut myself and my congregation off from learning what Evangelicals had to teach us.  
And that's not all.  
That same line effectively cut us off from sharing with others what God had given us,  
the knowledge of a God who welcomes all.

Back in 2020 Pastor Simmonds was teaching an online Bible study  
and he asked me if I would attend.  
I asked him what the subject was and he said, "Homosexuality".  
And I said, "Then, no".  
He said, "Why not?"  
And I replied, "Because I'll just get angry and annoyed and irritated with you  
and your narrow-minded beliefs".  
And he replied, "That's why I want you there – to present the other side".  
I said, "Are you sure you want me there?"  
And he said, "Definitely!" So I went.  
He presented his beliefs – which were actually more liberal than I had anticipated  
and it seemed he was stretching them a bit.  
Then he asked me what I thought.  
And I told the group how in my former congregation  
I had performed a Civil Union for 2 women back when that was first allowed.  
They were women who had felt unwelcomed by the Roman Catholic Church  
and by another denomination, but had found a home at Tabor.  
I explained that if I had not performed the Civil Union,  
those 2 women would have left the church –  
not just the congregation, but the Christian Church.  
At the end of the session one woman said she had never realized how judgmental she had been  
and she was asking God to change her heart to make her more open.  
And the next day I got a call from another person in the group  
who told me that there was a gay couple that lived across the street from him  
and he had never even given them the time of day, never even waved at them,  
because he had seen them as "those kind of people".  
He said that after hearing my story, he realized that they were God's children, too.

The groups, the organizations, the tribes of which we are a part  
have unwritten rules, many of which were not even aware.  
When the bishop and staff wrote the document called "Collaborate, for Christ's sake!",  
they brought it first to the deans for our feedback.  
At the end of the discussion I said,  
"I have a concern.  
In this document you're suggesting that we look for collaboration  
within the Lutheran Church  
and within the denominations with whom we are in intercommunion.  
But it has been my experience that we learn the most, and we grow the most,  
and God is able to do the most through us  
when we collaborate with people who are different from us."  
The bishop said, "You're right. Of course.  
We are just so used to thinking within our own group, within our own tribe,  
that we forget that God might be calling us to collaborate with people outside."  
He said, "We will make those changes before we present it to Synod Council." And they did.  
I've been reading this story in Acts all my life,  
and yet it took God until just a few years ago to finally get me to understand it

God wanted the Church to spread throughout the world.

But even though Peter and the others had been transformed at Pentecost  
from fearful followers into powerful preachers,  
they were still drawing boundaries around their mission field.

But Jesus' business

is to break through the boundaries, to step over the lines, to tear down the walls  
that divide God's children.

The mission of the church is to go – NOT where we want – but to where God calls us –  
which is ALWAYS to cross the lines that divide us.

It's not something that Peter or we have been taught to do.

It's not something that Peter or we will necessarily find natural or comfortable.

But just as God called Peter, so God calls us –

to move out of our comfort zone and to go where we have not gone before.

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That takes me back to the article Karl put in the email blast.

What was the mission of the Starship Enterprise?

“Space: the final frontier.

These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise.

Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds.

To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before!”

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Well, in a strange way that's the mission of the church –

for Peter it was to explore the strange new world beyond Galilee and Judea,  
to seek out new life and new civilizations among the Gentiles,  
to boldly go where no Jewish missionary had gone before.

And for us the call to mission is no less –

it's the call to explore not worlds that are similar to us, but strange new worlds,  
not to seek out congregations that are like us,  
but to seek out new life in congregations that are different from us,  
not to stay in the safety and comfort of where we've been,  
but to go where we have never gone before.

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Like God called Peter, God calls us to move beyond our own group  
and build relationships with people who are not like us.

Will we be criticized? Probably. Peter was.

But Peter did what he was called to do, and so must we.

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For just as the article in the email blast said,

“when one draws a line and places some people on the other side of that line,  
God is always on the other side of that line with them”.

I don't know about you - but I'm going to keep stepping across those lines  
because the place I want to be is on God's side. **Amen**