

Acts 11:1-18 Bill Uetracht 5.15.25 5 Easter

If you know me at all, you realize that I am a big fan of Catholic priest, thinker, and prophet Richard Rohr. Rohr has been for me a mentor, someone who has opened my eyes, challenged my thinking, caused me to love even more the faith that has shaped my entire life.

An insight from Rohr that has really affected my thinking is what he calls the “wisdom pattern,” the notion that life in faith and life in general are a matter of order, disorder and reordering. Rohr thinks that this is the pattern of life itself. Even creation participates in it. We see it in the seasons of the year, the stories of Scripture, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the rise and fall of civilizations, our own lives. Order . . .disorder . . .and reorder.

I couldn’t help but reflect on this pattern as I confronted our first reading from Acts today. The story tells us about one of the great struggles of the early church, the struggle over who is welcome and what people have to do in order to be welcome. It was a struggle between “us” and “them.”

The struggle came to a head because of a vision that Peter had. Peter was a part of the “order” crowd. He had learned his faith well, and that faith had served him well. He had been a Jew and become a Christian Jew who was convinced that new converts to the Christian movement needed to go through the same things that he went through. In other words, if you were going to become a Christian, you needed to be a Jew first. You needed to be circumcised. (Sorry, women!) And you needed to submit to the food laws that Jews practiced. That seemed like a good order. If it worked for him, it should work for others.

But here’s the problem. What do you do when the folks who are desiring to participate in your faith come from different cultures than yours? After all, how much of your religious practice is really just *cultural* practice? Lutherans often struggle with this. Some of us forget that reserved religious worship, green and red Jello salads, the inability to clap on the downbeat, and potlucks are not essentials to the faith; they

are cultural matters. But what are cultural matters and what are not? Are there non-negotiables? What are they? Circumcision and food laws? They seem like they are a necessary part of the order, especially since the Bible says so. How far does inclusion need to go?

These were some of the issues. And let's be honest. Order is a very good thing. I think most people would tell you that most people do better when they start in order, when they know what is expected of them. Children need order. They may tell you otherwise, but they do better when they have it. Too many folks these days lack order. They lack patterns. In some ways, it seems that life for so many of us is just one individual choice after another. We don't fit into any pattern; we just *choose* our way into the future, as if life were one giant Meijer aisle, with 150 options for toothpaste. Life defined as individual consumer choice, truthfully, can be quite chaotic, even overwhelming.

In my work as a pastor, I have heard countless parents tell me that they don't want to expose their kids to a particular form of religion, because, well, they want them to choose for themselves. Come on. If you don't give kids something, they won't have something to build on or react to. They need some patterns. It's good for them to show up at church week after week, even if they don't want to. It's good for them to learn the basics. It's good for them to have a tradition that can help shape them for the rest of their lives. We do better work when we start in order.

But I've got to tell you. Order is a good starting place, but it's not meant to be the place where you take up residence. Look at what happened to Peter. God messed with his little order. Through a *vision*, God spoke to Peter about that order. Through a *vision*, God disordered his little settled world.

Truthfully, we don't move into disorder on the basis of our own volition. We generally like our little ordered universes, which is why we tend to hang out with people who think just like us. Our politics, our religion, our approaches to living—they are often pretty settled realities.

It frequently takes something outside of ourselves to change our minds. Something like an educational experience, a preached word, an encounter, maybe even with someone close to home. When someone in your household or among your friends ends up being gay, all of a sudden, you have to take a second look at your settled universe.

Peter's experience of disorder came through a divine vision, which I think is the Bible's way of recognizing that very often we don't go into disorder without a little push. Most of us don't raise our hands and say, "Please change me." Rohr argues that sometimes for change to take place we must go through what he calls "necessary suffering." When Peter in his vision is told that he should get up, kill, and eat all kinds of animals that he was taught not to eat, especially by the Bible, he says, "Don't even think about going there. I have never eaten those things. Not eating them has been a part of my identity. I am Peter who doesn't eat ham sandwiches. It is a part of the order I've known. It has served me and my people well." I am Dutch Reformed I don't mow my lawn on Sunday. What's wrong with a good identity marker?

But God is in the business of unsettling and disordering, so much so that Peter must have the vision three times. I told you once. I told you twice. I am now telling you for the third time. We all are a little slow.

You can eat ham sandwiches, Peter. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Actually, you can eat any animal, Peter, even if the Bible told him that you shouldn't. And most importantly, Peter, you can eat with anyone, especially the Gentiles.

Here is the crux of the matter. Gentiles are welcome, and they don't have to do things the way you do them in order to be welcome. I mean if they and you don't want to eat ham sandwiches, that's probably okay. After all, ham has entirely too much sodium in it. But their connection to the community is not based on them not eating pork. Your relationship with them is not dependent upon them becoming like you. The Spirit of God moves upon them as much the Spirit moves upon you. And this Spirit brings a new day.

Now I must tell you that the people who have been a part of your little club will not always be understanding when you start hanging around with the Gentiles. Peter's fellow club members criticized him when he started hanging out with them. They asked him pointedly: "Why do you go to circumcised men and eat with them? Shame on you. We don't hang around with such people." Your friends may criticize you when you make new friends.

Disorder isn't always easy. Sometimes it can be some of the hardest work we will ever do. It isn't easy to get over your political opinions. It isn't easy to get over your notions about life and people. One of the hardest things in my life has been realizing that every time I think I have life figured out, men and women figured out, poverty figured out, politics figured out, I discover that I don't have them figured out. Every conclusion I have reached has needed to be changed or nuanced. It ain't easy getting over yourself. It ain't easy dying to yourself. But this is what it means to follow Jesus. In fact, this is just the way life is. Life brings disorder to our every attempt to nail down order. It disorders our nice little religious boxes. It may even turn our little politics upside down. It may disrupt the dreams we have for our families. Order, then disorder. Life, then death.

The story isn't finished there, though, something that the resurrection of Jesus reveals. It doesn't all end in death. We who follow Jesus, we who participate in the way life is, know disorder can indeed be transformed into a new order. There's new life that can emerge and often emerges out of disorder. Peter is anticipating that new life in our text for today: "If God gave the same gift to them that he gave us when we believed in the Lord, who was I that I could hinder God?" If God is in the business of creating a new order, why should I get in the way? Why shouldn't I sit down with the Gentiles and eat with them? If God is out in front of me creating a whole new community, why shouldn't I be participating in that much bigger community? Why shouldn't my little world get a lot bigger?

There's new life that emerges out of disorder. And while I know that there is much grieving that goes on when our worlds are challenged or changed, but let me assure you, the story isn't over. And sometimes the new order is much more fascinating and often more real, authentic. Those who have experienced their family lives not becoming what they dreamed of often become much more understanding of others whose lives are equally messy. There is a deep communion, an intimacy, new life that emerges because of shared pain.

You know, I am struck by the way the Bible ends its story, which we experience in our reading from Revelation today: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." The final act of God, according to Revelation, is God reordering not just your life, my life, the church's life, but everything. The end is a new order for *everything*. If that is so, we live now realizing that our little ordered worlds are quite small, that our disordered lives are normal and necessary, but not final. The final truth rests in the hands of God who indeed makes *all* things new. There is a famous line that says, "It ain't over until it's over." It ain't over until God speaks the final reordering word.