

I spoke to a friend who pastors a church in Western Massachusetts and he told me about an old diary he'd unearthed in some boxed files. It was from 1940 and the pastor was brand new in his church. The pastor had noted that on his first day, all of the people came and sat up front and to the left-hand side of the pulpit. He thought it odd that no one sat on the right side and actually wondered if people were missing that day. (You know how people like to sit in the same seats every week!). He began preaching and noticed that half-way through his sermon, all of the people in the church got up and walked over to the right-hand side of the church and sat down, leaving the left side empty. The pastor didn't miss a beat, he finished the sermon and the service. After church, he asked people, 'what was that all about?' 'What?' they asked, truly mystified. "Getting up and moving half way through the sermon!" "Oh," they replied, "that's just what we do here. **We've always done it that way.**" The pastor thought the practice odd and set out to find out more.

Months later, in the fireproof safe, he found a gem. It was an old church ledger with all kinds of information in it. The pages were very delicate and the handwriting scrawling and difficult to read. This ledger had all kinds of historical information from the 1800's. One particular entry was of note. I don't remember the year, but it was from January. It talked about how the church had just gotten a new wood stove. It was up front, on the left-hand side. As my friend continued to read the entries, he learned that this new stove made all the difference in the world when people came in from the cold, but about half way through the sermon (which was about an hour in those days), the people would find the heat was too much, so they'd move to other side of the church. Fast forward to 1940--the church folks just kept doing what they'd been doing for decades, even though no one knew exactly why. Those folks had to 'unlearn' and 'relearn' a particular behavior.

There is 'unlearning' and 'relearning' happening in our scripture passage today. Peter is up on a rooftop praying. In those days, rooftops were used almost like patios. He falls into a trance and sees a vision where God tells him that all animals are okay to eat. For a devout Jew like Peter, that wasn't okay and he says no to God. After all, Jewish people had (and have) very strict rules about keeping kosher. So Peter says to God, "Oh, no, I won't eat anything that is unclean!" And God says, what I've made clean is clean. Peter has to unlearn all of his kosher dietary laws. Previously there was a boundary—a barrier--between clean and unclean, but God has bridged that barrier.

Now Peter has to do some 'unlearning' and 'relearning' what he can eat. Over the course of our lives, we've also 'unlearned' and 'relearned' things. When you get home, Google 'how to eat a pineapple'. I guarantee it's not how you've been doing it your whole life! We have unlearned going grocery shopping with the expectation that we'll get plastic bags at Hannaford. We had to relearn that our foods will be packaged in our reusable bags or in paper bags that we pay for. Years ago, you may have lathered on the baby oil and used tin foil to reflect the sun onto your face, but today, you put on the 30+ sunscreen to go out! We unlearned playing Cowboys and Indians and relearned that Columbus Day is more accurately observed as Indigenous People's Day. By the way, last week, Maine joined 6 other states and 130 cities and towns in renaming the holiday.

Unlearning and relearning is going on in the Scripture passage today.

It's not insignificant that Peter ponders exactly what his vision means as Cornelius' trio shows up on his doorstep. Previously, there were boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. Even though Cornelius is what's known as a "God-fearer" he still wasn't Jewish. He still wasn't a follower of Jesus' Way. And he was still a Roman soldier. Peter remembers all too well his last encounter with Roman soldiers and how that worked out for Jesus. He has to let go of his fears and his prejudices and trust that God has made this convergence happen.

In light of his new understanding about God making everything clean, Peter realizes that Jesus' teachings are for everyone. When he gets to Cornelius' place, where "many had gathered", he shares the good news! God has bridged this barrier.

I want to teach you some Greek. This is a term that may have even been spoken by Cornelius, Peter, and Jesus in their day since Greek was the cosmopolitan language. The term is this: Oli Mazi. Say it with me: Oli Mazi. It means 'all together'.

Remember what Jesus said last week, "Go and make disciples of all nations". This is a message of radical inclusion. Oli mazi. **Everyone is welcome.**

Jesus knew that the more connected we are to God, the more connected we'll be to each other. And the more connected we are to each other, the more connected we'll be to God.

Another thing that is certain is that there is a certain fluidity to Spirit's workings and that faith can lead to flexibility. In the United Church of Christ, we recognize that God didn't say it all 2,000 years ago; God is still speaking today. And that may mean that things change in our understanding, our behavior, and our lives.

Our story started with a vision about food, but we realize that it's not so much **what** you have for dinner, but more about **who** is welcome at the table.

You may have heard it said that you should live your life as though it's the only Bible someone will ever read. In order to do that, is there anything that you need to 'unlearn' and with the grace of God, to relearn? Blessed be and amen.