

①

Many of you have asked how my trip with my Dad went to Washington D.C. for the Honor Flight. It was a wonderful experience touring our nation's memorial sites that honor our veterans and seeing the deep appreciation of the crowds who gathered to offer their appreciation. The event was well planned, and everything seemed to be in order—from the flight to D.C. to the tour bus to the meals to the coordination of crowds who gathered at just the right time to offer their thanks.

When I arrived back in the office after a week of vacation, I seemed a bit out of order. It's as though after being gone and doing projects around the house and visiting with my family that I had to remember what I was supposed to do once back at work.

Have you ever had that happen? You begin a new job, take a vacation, or move to new community, and you have to figure out new routines, new patterns in your life. We get so used to doing things the same way that when a change occurs, we might find ourselves a bit confused, as though we're out of order. I think that's why many of us like things to

stay the same and why we avoid change, for we like our familiar routines and ways of doing things.

If that's the case with you as well, you might not like today's scripture from the Book of Acts, for several times things seem mixed up, and you might find yourself muttering, "That's not the way it's done. You're out of order." You might even feel a bit uncomfortable. If you don't want the Bible messing with your ordered life, now's your chance to leave church a bit early. Get a table for lunch and wait for the rest of us.

Speaking of lunch, this is the first situation in the scripture that seems a bit out of order for Peter, the disciple of Jesus. He had gone up to the roof for prayer, which may seem a bit odd to us today, for not many of us sit on the tops of our homes for prayer. But back in Peter's day before the luxury of air conditioning, sitting on the flat roof in the breeze was the coolest spot and probably the quietest place to be alone for prayer.

It was lunch time, and Peter was hungry. The smells of the cooking food drifted to the rooftop and began to weave into his time of meditation, and in

②

Peter's meditative trance, he envisioned a sheet lowered to the rooftop, filled with all kinds of animals. A voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

Just imagine his surprise, for the group of animals included those considered unclean, against the dietary rules, ones that were not to be eaten. Peter objected, "You're out of order, God, for I have never eaten anything unclean and not fit to eat."

God replied, "What God has made clean, you must not call unfit to eat."

While Peter sat on the roof trying to unravel this oddly out-of-order vision, downstairs messengers arrived from Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army. Imagine Peter's initial fear—messengers from a Roman soldier were knocking at his door, soldiers connected to those who had killed Jesus and were hunting down the rest of the Christians who fled after Jesus' death. Although Peter had experienced the risen Christ, those who killed him believed the resurrection was a hoax, a story they had to suppress. Peter may have believed that Cornelius was the enemy, a dreaded cohort in the execution of

Jesus. It would have been much safer to remain hidden on the roof, but God's Spirit nudged Peter into a situation that seems out of order: to go downstairs and meet with the messengers from Cornelius.

As Peter reluctantly met with the messengers, he learned that Cornelius worshiped God and had been inspired by an angel to meet with Peter, and so the next morning Peter traveled to meet with Cornelius. There, he found a crowd of people, and Peter explained, "You know this is highly out of order, for our religious people don't normal meet with your people. But God showed me that no kind of people are better than any other—no one is unclean or unfit." Peter explained his vision of God inviting him to accept unclean animals, which he finally realized was actually about accepting people.

He told them about how Jesus had come to the world to bring God's hope, how even death could not stop the amazing work that God was doing in the world.

While Peter was speaking, God's Holy Spirit came upon the listeners. Peter was surprised, for this was

③

quite a change: the gift of the Spirit had come upon outsiders! Peter exclaimed, “These Gentiles have been given the Holy Spirit, just as we have! I am certain that no one would dare stop us from baptizing them” (Acts 10:47, CEV).

Did you notice what seems out of order in this story? The usual pattern in the Bible is: first, baptism, then, receiving God’s Spirit. But these outsiders received God’s Spirit first, and then Peter invited them to be baptized. That’s out of order. Against the norms of how they understood God worked in the world.

Centuries later, Walter Scott, the 19th century Disciples evangelist who helped begin what we now call the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), used a five-finger exercise to remind townsfolk of the order to receive God’s gift. As this traveling evangelist entered town on horseback, he would gather children around him and teach them five simple steps using the fingers on his hand. They would then run home and tell their parents about what they had learned, and the parents would show up at the revival to learn more about these basic steps of following Jesus.

The traditional order he told them was: first, hearing and believing about the life of Jesus and how God was working in the world; second, repent from sins, for we all make mistakes and need to seek God’s forgiveness; third, be baptized in the waters of God’s love; fourth, receive forgiveness; and finally, receive God’s Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is the last step, after baptism.

Walter Scott knew the traditional order, and so did Peter, so centuries earlier Peter was quite surprised when new followers of Jesus did things out of order. Have you ever done things out of order, not following the directions? Sometimes it’s important to follow directions, as was the case with a boyfriend planning to visit his new girlfriend at her apartment for the first time.

The young lady gave directions to get to her apartment. She said: “You come to the front door of the apartment complex where I live and look for apartment 14A, and with your elbow push button 14A. Come inside and you’ll find the elevator on the right. With your elbow hit 14. When you get out of the elevator, you’ll find my apartment on the left. With your elbow, hit my doorbell and I’ll open the door for you.”

④

The boyfriend asked: “Dear, that sounds very easy to find, but why am I hitting all these buttons with my elbow?”

“Oh, my goodness!! You’re not coming empty-handed, are you?”¹

It’s good to do things in order and follow directions, but God doesn’t always do things in the order you and I expect. We tend to place barriers against those we think are outside of God’s love, but somehow God invites those outsiders to the inside. Whatever labels you have that draw boundaries—whether labels of race, sexuality, economic status, or politics—God is out of order by inviting them into God’s place.

Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farm, inspired Millard and Linda Fuller to build homes, first in a group called Habitat for Humanity and later through The Fuller Center. In Jordan’s book *Cotton Patch Parables*, Jordan wrote how God is out of order in mathematics and love:

God doesn’t go by the kind of arithmetic that you and I go by. God has never learned to deal in fractions. God didn’t get that far in school. I think he’s like my father who had ten children, and many a time I thought, “Well, my goodness, with a family this big, Daddy can’t love me very much. I can only claim one tenth of his love.” But my father loved me with all of his love. It’s just that way with love. There is no fraction in it. You can’t break it up into pieces. And God wants the whole human race. He just can’t deal in fractions.

And so Jesus is saying to these people who were griping and mumbling and grumbling about the fact that he was taking in all kinds of people, bums and drunks and the poor folks and everybody, he was saying, “Well, I just can’t help it. God just has a sentimental attachment for his people. And, whether you like it or not, God loves ‘em, and it does seem to me that if they’re precious in God’s sight, they ought to be precious in yours, too.”²

That may seem out of order, but often, that’s how God works, inviting those outside to enter into God’s family of love.

¹ *Homiletics Online*, Jan. 12, 2014 (adapted).

² Clarence Jordan, *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* (Herald Books, 1976).