

Most of us go through life putting people into neat boxes. Sometimes we do this consciously: tall, short, fat, thin, wears weird clothes, wears normal clothes—you get the drift. Sometimes we do it subconsciously: good, bad, arrogant, friendly, isn't like me, is like me.

We're so busy assessing people and things and words and places, it's a wonder we have any time left to just be. To just love.

The only times our brains take a break from their endless propensity to categorize, name and label—is when we are asleep.

Even Peter is so caught up doing what he thinks that Jesus wants him to do, serving the poor, healing the sick, and talking to people that he may not be listening with full attention to God's voice. So God comes to Peter in a dream.

In this dream, God uses images from Peter's own mind. God shows him a large sheet of cloth—possibly from the large bolts of fabric the women weave to make clothing and other coverings. In this sheet of cloth, there is a large assortment of beasts, reptiles and birds. Some are considered kosher, some are forbidden to consume under the law.

God says to Peter, "Kill and eat." This probably sounds a bit harsh to our ears, since very few of us probably kill the roast chicken or cows that we eat. We just march into the store and buy meat already slaughtered for us. But in the day—kill and eat would have been as common as if we heard God say today, "Go and pick up some baby back ribs, Peter."

And Peter reacts like any good Jew would: "Oh no, Lord. The bible says I can't eat those things. They are bad for me. They are profane."

Even in the dream Peter is probably expecting praise.

"Good job my son. Way to follow the word! High Five!"

But he's surprised by God.

"What God has created clean, you must not call profane."

"But wait!" Peter answers, confused. "It says IN THE BIBLE that there are animals that are profane. That's why we can't eat them. It says so, God. IT'S IN THE SCRIPTURE!"

But God is unrelenting, and shows Peter the image twice more. Until Peter finally understands. If God says things are clean, they are. No matter what the bible says. No matter what Peter has been taught. This is a new teaching that the children of light are now able to understand. Because of Jesus.

God then makes sure Peter has understood. He sends him to people that the bible has called profane, and tells him to share the good news with them. Peter does, and God sends his Spirit upon those that the bible had previously labeled as abominations.

God seems to be saying that he created everything that is, and God does not create unclean things.

So what is the message here for us?

Peter is being taught that all people are counted as God's beloved children, no matter what his culture or the scripture has taught him.

Can you feel yourself resisting that thought? Welcome to Peter's world. He resisted it, too.

Perhaps our parents believed that certain types of people were bad, not worthy to be called God's children. If they were part of World War 2, perhaps it was the Japanese. So they passed along their hatred of the Japanese to their children. Now the Japanese are our allies. What do they do with that?

It is indeed uncomfortable when we learn facts that counter our parent's teaching, so we resist what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach us. We, like Peter, have been taught things we sometimes find it distressing to give up.

God understands, but persists in giving us visions. God gives people dreams which they hold up to us, as God held it up he dream to Peter.

Since the days Jesus walked the earth, we have learned and matured a great deal.

We learned that woman are fully human. The leaders of the church argued against us being so until the 14th century.

We've learned that people of color aren't 3/5 human.

We've learned that if one is born LGBTQ+ they don't have a mental illness.

We've learned that some who in the past were called mentally ill, crazy or nuts are merely neurologically diverse.

I think all of us can see that humanity has matured, learned. We've can easily see that labeling people—keeping them in a box--- isn't a good thing.

Even labels we don't think twice about: male or female, fat or thin—these labels have to power to limit others.

For example, we can see that labeling someone Democrat or Republican these days tends to stop conversation. Oftentimes, using these labels causes us to see and magnify our differences and so we are unaware of how we are connected.

God urges Peter to go beyond old thinking, to go past the preconceptions, past the judgements that only let us see tiny portions of each other, and not allow us to see the complexities and wonder of each being we encounter. We will miss the fact that in various and diverse ways God is inside us all. We are all connected.

And if we are all connected and God's spirit dwells in each of us—how can we hurt each other? How can we judge each other? How can we disconnect from each other?

We can get so caught up in labels and boxes and our ways to disconnect from each other, that we forget who we follow, and what his last words were to us.

As I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Sometimes I fear that all the tension, distrust and hatred in our current culture is infecting the church.

But hear this: the world needs us—the followers of Jesus-- to infect the culture.

How we behold each other enables us all to see our own worth.

God is calling us to Peter's vision of connection. God calls us to see that part of him in everyone. We are called to Peter's counter cultural vision of the connection of all living things. Amen.