

**6th Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2009 – 10 am**

Barbara Brown Taylor has a new book out called *An Altar in the World*.

I was reminded of today's scriptures in reading one section last week. She writes: "There are times when dancing on tables grants more life than kneeling in prayer. More to the point, there are times when dancing on tables is the most authentic prayer in reach, even if it pocks the table and clears the room."

My friends, it is that kind of exuberance with which we ought to be able to hear today's readings—all three of them, for a change.

The first reading from Acts 10 is one of the most astounding pieces of revelation described anywhere. It is the Christian church at its earliest (not even called Christian yet). There were no buildings, no doctrines, no vestments, or rituals; just the power of the Holy Spirit astounding people everywhere and bringing life and light all over the town.

The story from the 10th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles gets broken up in our liturgical readings at Mass. So let me re-cap a bit in order to get the full picture.

It is about one Cornelius. Cornelius is a good, God-fearing man well-liked by the Jewish community despite the fact that he was a Roman

Centurion, a leader of the elite occupying army, and an “unclean” and, by definition, unholy man. But he has a vision and is told to call Joppa to retrieve one Simon Peter whom he has never met, to come and tell his family and friends about their salvation.

Before Peter arrives (which is when today’s reading begins), he has his own disconcerting vision on the road. Poor Peter was starving but before he had a chance to eat, he sees this large sheet being dropped out of the heavens filled with all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean to any observant Jew. Peter then hears the voice of an angel telling him to take, kill and eat. Peter replies, somewhat angrily, no, nothing profane or unclean has ever crossed these lips. The voice then said to him: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” And this happens three more times and then the sheet is carried back up to heaven.

Peter is thoroughly flummoxed and deeply concerned at this major change in God’s commands. This is not the God he thought he knew. But he ain’t seen nothin’ yet! Now Cornelius’ men arrive and take him to meet the family. Here is poor Peter, now in the home of a Gentile (clearly a no-no), a Centurion no less (double no-no), being offered dinner (triple no-no) and asked to speak of his Jesus. He already has an inkling from his vision that to

eat this profane food might not be the worst thing in the world to do, so he does. (I bet it tasted good, too!) Then he gives the short homily (much shorter, thank God, than mine) explaining the life, death, and rising of Jesus. (This is the first reading from Easter morn.)

But, while Peter is still speaking, to day's reading says, the Holy Spirit falls upon the whole house. Everybody begins to praise God and starts speaking in tongues. Peter then has a further change of heart. He says to all, his Jewish friends first and then everybody else, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?" And he orders them to be baptized.

And everybody is dancing on the tables in the Spirit! Except, perhaps, for the few Jewish friends of Peter who are terrified at what they are seeing and experiencing. They will return to chastize Peter when he returns to Jerusalem.

And Psalm 98 sings: "The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power... All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God..." They might have sung the same Psalm we just did! It was a mini-Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit herself is leading the song and dance. Why? The next two readings today offer an answer.

John, in both the letter and the gospel attributed to him, takes up the

song, and the dance continues. Both the second and third readings (the gospel) described a kind of “love chain.” I realize that sounds like something *Austin Powers: the International Man of Mystery* might say, but it’s not a bad description. The “love chain.” John’s letter: “Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God...for God is love.” John’s gospel: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love....You are my friends...love one another that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete.”

This is the “love chain.” The Father loves me as I love him. I love you as the Father loves me. You just need to love each other as we both love you. And there is no thing, and no one who is profane or impure. No one, period! Full stop! And there are no footnotes! This is what Peter learns in short order.

(Permit me a brief aside. Two weeks ago, after this liturgy, I heard the parents of a young gay man agonizing over which Catholic bumper sticker to believe: The one that says hopefully “God doesn’t make junk.” Or the one that says: “Sometimes God’s plan gets frustrated and is not fulfilled. It leaves some people defective!”

These parents were guests at our church. They had heard about our Gay and Lesbian Concerns group and needed help. To them, their young

son's whole life was at stake. I think of them again this morning. I hope wherever ever they hear today's readings, they have an answer—from an unimpeachable source. There can be no “inside” and “outside.” There is nothing and no one who is impure or profane. And again, please note, there are no footnotes! No qualifications! No will be no more scapegoats!)

The only real question that remains, brothers and sisters, is: Can we afford to let this word in? Let Jesus' joy in, so that our own joy can be complete? That's all he says he wants for us—all of us. God's gift, God's plan is a party—to which *all* are invited. The guest list will probably upset some of us. It is far too inclusive! But the emotion, the joy Jesus speaks about can be infectious.

Can we listen to Barbara Brown Taylor again: “There are times when dancing on tables is the most authentic prayer in reach.” So damn the pock-marks on the table, and who cares if our love clears the room. A modest suggestion: Why not just try it. This inclusive joy is what Easter is really all about. Let's just try it! Peace be with you!