

"Unexpected Unity"

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“Crossing Borders/Cruzando Fronteras Encountering God/Encontrando a Dios”
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Texts: Acts 10: 24-33; 44-48, Ezekiel 33:1-11

Christian discipleship is a continuous search for and participation in God’s activity in the world. Discipleship is not resisting, but discovering, embracing, and allowing ourselves to be surprised by the Spirit's pull to move our Christian community to places we have never been before, or like in “Star Trek” to “unchartered territories.”

The book of Acts shows an imperative from God through the power of the Holy Spirit to cross boundaries: cultural, linguistic, economic, ethnic/racial. It is a fascinating story of communication, intercultural dynamics, mission, and discipleship.

In the book of Acts, amazement, perplexity, and surprise seem to be constants in both the disciples and those who encounter them. In chapter 2, when the disciples receive the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues to people of different regions, the text indicates that:

... At this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because *each one heard them speaking in the native language of each*. Amazed and astonished, they asked: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our native languages.... All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another "What does this mean?"

Is *our* Christian discipleship one of ... and one that generates ... perplexity, surprise, and a new beginning?

Acts 10 is one of the most interesting stories of cross-cultural and inter-religious encounter in the New Testament. It is a story of a dramatic crossing of boundaries by two, very different, persons and communities for the sake of the Gospel.

The story involves, as Augustine once said, “risking Christ for Christ’s sake.” Interestingly, biblical scholars used to entitle this story "the conversion of Cornelius." Recently, some are suggesting that this story is more about Peter's conversion than the Roman centurion’s encounter with God. In reality, this story is about conversions, period.

Both Cornelius and Peter, through the power of the Holy Spirit, discover something new about the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a missional story, not only because a sympathetic pagan is converted,

but because a Jewish Christian leader is also converted. In this story, both Peter and Cornelius co-participate in God's mission. Both are subjects, agents of God's mission. But both are also objects, receptors of God's mission through the Holy Spirit.

This is not about one being deficient and the other being adequate, perfect, complete. This story is not even about both being deficient or both being adequate, perfect, complete. Rather, this story is about re-discovering the gospel of Jesus Christ. This story is about a new beginning!

Through an unprecedented nonviolent encounter between these two persons and communities, an unexpected gospel is embodied, demonstrated. It becomes a witness to something new – challenging, even dangerous, risky, and yet new and life-giving.

My sisters and brothers, this story's main protagonist is neither Peter nor Cornelius but the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who generates an interplay between communities, the crossing of biographies — cultural, linguistic, political, economic, and religious. You see, sisters and brothers, frequently when we cross borders, we see, hear, feel, or experience nothing.

That usually happens when we are living totally on our own terms. But when we live on God's terms, the Spirit places us and pulls and pushes us to see, to hear, to experience, and to grow — with pain and joy — the gospel anew!

But frequently the Spirit works in challenging ways. A good way to understand the character of the work of the Holy Spirit in this encounter is to recognize that Cornelius has a clear vision that will take him to a different place, while Peter has been thrown into puzzlement, uncertainty. It's quite a predicament.

The Holy Spirit is saying: "Make it happen, Cornelius. Send your people to a strange place and ask for one who hates you, and you will discover the unexpected." And to Peter, the Spirit says: "It's time to make something of this puzzling vision, Peter. You will only discover the meaning of 'I have made all things clear' as you do the unexpected!"

We do not get the inside story of Peter's puzzlement. But it is interesting that while Peter is thinking, Cornelius' people invade Peter's relatively safe religious and cultural space and tell him of Cornelius' vision. We have to wonder what Peter is thinking: "Am I to visit a Gentile's household? Might this visit be the key to my unclear vision? How is all of this connected to the vision, if it is connected at all?"

This does not look good, yet Peter acts and offers hospitality to Cornelius' servants.

Questions and good Christian intuition: these may be two of the best characteristics to inform and shape our mission engagement and activity.

Peter is challenged by the Holy Spirit and asked by profane Gentiles to cross a significant boundary, a boundary of religious and social identity. Moreover, he is being asked to visit an enemy of his people. But he wonders... He wonders and he connects. Peter is puzzled! Yet, he offers hospitality.

We read: “So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.”

Questions, intuitions, and hospitality: what a combination of character traits and behavior!
Could we imagine our mission discipleship being shaped by these traits and behavior?

Questions and intuitions and hospitality.... Questions and intuitions certainly help us in discerning our puzzlement. But hospitality? ...Hospitality to members of the household of a pagan gentile enemy?

What connects people with people in a time of uncertain and unjust day-to-day conditions?
What has God given creation to discover its connectedness?

Ezekiel puts in our face the image of blood. Speaking to the sentinel, speaking to the prophet, God is incisive and demanding. The image of blood, of life, becomes the ultimate test of accountability.

The images are totally counter-intuitive to our modern, post-modern and perhaps even post-colonial worldviews. The text says: “...Their blood shall be upon their own heads. ...Their blood shall be upon themselves. ...But their blood I will require at the sentinel’s hand. ...[If] you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand.”

Blood... *sangre*. Life ... *la vida*.

The sentinel’s, the prophet’s life is at risk, and the prophet’s vocation is intrinsically embedded with the people, with the wicked.

This text runs against that famous late 19th/early 20th century Christian statement, still declared today in many Christian communities, one of the strongest legacies of modern Protestant theology — “salvation is personal.”

Perhaps an even more dramatic interpretation of this statement might be “salvation is private.”

Sisters and brothers, friends, blood ties! *La sangre amarra*. Blood bonds.

Perhaps the witness of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero in El Salvador can shed light on this sacramental imagery of blood for us. Monsignor Romero’s biographies tell of a turning point in his ministry: the assassination of his friend, Padre Rutilio Grande. Padre Rutilio, a martyr of the Salvadoran church, was assassinated on March 12, 1977. Just one month before his assassination, he preached:

“It is practically illegal to be a true Christian in El Salvador...” [And perhaps the time has come when we must say that it is practically illegal to be a Christian in the United States!] In Christianity today you have to be ready [said Rutilio] to give up your life to serve a just order ... to save others, for the values of the Gospel!”

When Monsignor Romero received the news that his dear and closest friend and two other men were murdered, he wanted to see with his own eyes what happened. Rutilio's body was taken to the parish house. One Ernestina Rivera, an eye witness of Romero's encounter with his dead friend and priest, narrates¹ what transpired to be a night of a blood encounter:

“I [Ernestina] took off Father Grande's socks, all soaked with blood, and helped to undress him. He was dead. When I heard the news, I felt as if I was being picked up in the air and thrown down to the ground. I was so shaken that I don't even know how I got to the parish house. And now I asked myself how I lived through the events of the day. I loved him. That's why, to this day, I have saved a little piece of cloth soaked with his blood.

... It was midnight [she says] when Monseñor Romero arrived to see his body. He approached the little table where we had him, wrapped in a white sheet, and there he paused ... looking at him in a way that made me see that he loved him too. I didn't know Monseñor then. That night we heard his voice for the first time, preaching. When we heard him, it was a great surprise.

‘Ay! Even his voice [Romero's] is just like Father Grande's. That's what we all said. Because it seemed to us that right there, the words of Father Rutilio had been passed to Monseñor Romero. Right there. Truly.

‘Is it possible that God has worked this miracle so that we will not be left as orphans?’ my *comadre* whispered to me.” (44)

Blood bonds. An encounter of blood and solidarity transforms and generates a prophet for the people. The blood of the faithful sentinel, the blood of the faithful prophet is a seed of life and of justice ... of life for the orphans and an offer of reconciliation and life to the perpetrators.

During the Mass for Father Rutilio Grande in the Cathedral of San Salvador — perhaps the liturgical turning point in the life of Romero and the archdiocese — the words of an emerging prophet, tied by blood to the orphans and the perpetrators of El Salvador, offers an opportunity for conversion. Romero preaches with the tenacity of a prophet who does not play with sin and the overwhelming love and grace of Jesus:

“Who knows if the murderers that have now fallen into excommunication are listening to a radio in their hideout, listening, in their conscience to this word. We want to tell you, murderous brothers, that we love you and that we ask of God repentance for your hearts, because the church is not able to hate.” (45)

Blood ties; blood bonds! *¡La sangre une, la sangre amarra!*

¹ Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero and the Communion of the Saints* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

Is it a mere coincidence that this conference is held at the same time that raids are happening in southern Arizona? Is it a coincidence that this conference is held at the same time that hundreds of immigrants are crossing and dying in the desert? Is it a coincidence that this conference of Christian people, who love their countries, come together because the blood of so many claims our own blood? Is it a coincidence that this conference is held at a time when Border Patrol people, ICE officials — many, members of religious communities — struggle with what they are required to do at this time? Is it a coincidence that drug traffickers and dealers, human traffickers and dealers seem to be out of our picture, seen only as another variable of a tragic problem?

What do we have to say? What shall we do? *A todo ser humano que se encuentra en una situación con inmigrantes* — to all who encounter a situation with immigrants: *En el nombre del Señor* — In the name of the Lord: *Hagan justicia* — Do justice; *Protejan al vulnerable* — Protect the vulnerable; *No abusen de su poder* — Do not abuse your power; *Detengan la manipulación de los inmigrantes vulnerable para ganancia y placer pecaminoso* — Stop manipulating our vulnerable immigrants for profit and sinful pleasure; *Dejen la política del beneficio y la ignorancia y hagan lo justo y verdadero* — Stop the politics of personal benefits and ignorance and do what is just and truthful. *Todos busquemos la reconciliación* — Let's all seek reconciliation. *La sangre nos une, la sangre nos amarra* — Blood unites, blood ties us to each other.

What an unexpected discovery, sisters and brothers, for Christian and human unity!

Blood, not structures... Blood.

Peter declares the result of his conversion: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

We might think of these words as the ultimate interpretation and resolution of Peter's puzzlement. We might say that Peter finally got it! Yes he did.

But we know this was not because he knows the right theology. We know it is because he opened his heart to the mystery of an unexpected journey, a journey where blood ties. The Holy Spirit gives Peter the clue through the encounter and Peter's risk-taking.

Interestingly, he does not come to Cornelius with answers, but rather with a question, “Why did you send for me?”

Have you thought about why you are here? Can you imagine an immigrant saying, “Why have you sent for me?” Why has God sent us to this place? Why has God placed us at the border with our immigrant sisters and brothers? *La sangre nos amarra* — Blood ties.

But the question “Why have you sent for me?” remains.

And though the text begins to suggest that Peter has come to preach, the Holy Spirit takes over. There is yet another surprise for the already-puzzled apostle: Cornelius' household, the pagans of our story, speak in tongues. Peter knows. And he asks the assembled: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

It's not a statement, or a theological proposal, but rather another question. But this time the question implies something deeply radical and Christian:

These Gentiles are us!
These Africans are us!
These poor are us!
These Latin Americans are us!
These Koreans are us!
These Israelis are us!
These Palestinians are us!
These immigrants are us!
La sangre amarra — Blood ties.

How unexpected this is! We struggle to find ways to discover unity, and here we see that God has given us the clue since the beginning. *La sangre une, la sangre amarra* — Blood unites, blood ties. *La sangre redime* – blood redeems.

Amen.