

## WHEN PIGS FLY Acts 10:1-28

*(This sermon was adapted for my congregation from the sermon I preached at the 2018 ICCA Annual Conference.)*

It occurs to me that I've been your pastor for over a year now, and I haven't told you one of my favorite stories from over 20 years in the ministry. As you might imagine, being a woman in ministry has been challenging at times, interesting at times, and downright amusing at times. When I was a Southern Baptist campus minister at the University of Georgia, we held student worship on Tuesday nights. We usually invited local pastors to preach, but one Tuesday night it was my turn to preach. After worship, James, a very sincere, devout, conservative young man came up to me and said, "Rhonda, I wasn't happy about you preaching tonight, but you did a pretty good job. Can I come see you tomorrow?" I said, "Sure!" We made an appointment. James showed up right on time. "Rhonda," he said, "I wasn't happy about you preaching last night, but you did a pretty good job." I replied, "Oh, well, thank you, I think." He went on. "My roommates and I were talking last night. You remember the Old Testament story of Balaam's donkey?" "Sure," I said. "The story where God literally spoke through a donkey, right?" He said, "Right. My roommates and I decided if God can speak through a donkey, that God could speak through a woman." After I picked my jaw up off the floor, I affirmed the young man and his willingness to evolve in faith.

Today's scripture lesson presents someone evolving in faith. The lesson finds us continuing in the book of Acts, which is the story of how the early church formed and evolved along the way. So far in our journey through Acts, we've learned about Jesus ascending into heaven, and about the Holy Spirit descending upon those first believers. We've seen Peter and John preach and heal people. We've read about how the Aramaic-speaking apostles evolved, allowing the Greek-speaking Jews to be given places of leadership. We saw Stephen chosen, and then we read about his execution. We've met a guy named Saul who persecuted the church until his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. And today we encounter Peter, who would welcome Gentiles into this movement only when he saw pigs fly. Then in a vision, he saw pigs fly. And other "unclean" creatures. And he evolved.

Let me take a poll: how many of you are Gentiles (not Jewish)? If you raised your hand, you should give thanks that Peter saw pigs fly—enabling Peter to evolve in his views—opening the door for Gentiles like me and most of you to be a part of what we now call the church. Had this not happened, it's quite likely that this "Christian" movement would have remained a Jewish movement that fizzled out before the end of the first-century.

One remarkable thing about this story of the first Gentile to be converted to faith in Jesus Christ, is Peter's brazen law-breaking. He even names it when he tells Cornelius and his family, (paraphrased) "You know it's against the law for me (a Jew) to associate with you (a Gentile)." Which brings me to the idea:

***Just because it's the law doesn't mean it's just.***

God revealed this truth to Peter in a vision of flying pigs. It became crystal clear to Peter when he heard the Lord say, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

In what ways has God revealed to you that:

***Just because it's the law doesn't mean it's just?***

Last week I was in St. Louis at the annual conference of the International Council of Community Churches (ICCC), the small network of churches in which our church participates. The ICCC has a remarkable history that I was delighted to learn when I began serving an ICCC church in 2007. In my early ministry, I trained and served in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which has a sad history. The story goes, before the Civil War, Baptists from the South wanted to appoint as missionaries men who held slaves. Baptists in the North were opposed to slavery and to their missionaries holding slaves. So in 1845 the Baptists from the South split and the Southern Baptist Convention was born, allowing their missionaries to be slaveholders.

The ICCC, on the other hand, formed in 1950 as a merger between black community churches and white community churches. I am told that they met in Chicago—the only place in the country they could find that would allow blacks and whites to meet together. Remember, it was 1950. “Separate but equal” was still the law of the land in a racially charged environment. So as black and white met together, the leader of the black community churches and the leader of the white community churches crossed the stage, met in the middle, and shook hands, snubbing their collective noses at the Jim Crow laws designed to keep blacks and whites separate. It was 1950. You could walk down the street and see signs that read:

- “Help wanted: white only.”
- “Colored served in rear.”
- “Restroom: white only.”

Segregation was the law. But remember:

***Just because it's the law doesn't mean it's just.***

Today the ICCC remains beautifully diverse—about half of our congregations are predominantly black and half are predominantly white. When I first started attending ICCC meetings in 2008, racial division was a hot topic at the annual meetings. And while I appreciated the history of the ICCC, in 2008 I didn't see race as a relevant topic. I rolled my white, suburban eyes when the talk of racial tension emerged, thinking to myself, “C'mon, ICCC. Can we find a more relevant topic?”

And then Travon Martin.

And then Michael Brown.

And then Philando Castille.

And. So. Many. More.

And then God planted an individual in my life who helped me see more clearly—Peter fell into a trance in order to evolve—I fell into a conversation. From 2015-2017 I found myself in a clergy group that met at the local HBCU (Historic Black College and University) in Louisville, Kentucky. The other white clergy and I sat under the tutelage of Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby, pastor of a mega church and president of the HBCU. Brilliant black pastor. Cosby opened my eyes to inconvenient truths about our history—he taught me about how any gains made by blacks during reconstruction have been systemically shut down. He taught me that Papa John using the “n” word, and the faux outrage surrounding that and other events like it—

it's a smokescreen. Because the real outrage is that blacks are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites in a system of mass incarceration. The real outrage is the voter suppression in black communities. The real outrage is the systemic decimation of black institutions.

Cosby helped me understand part of my own history—that I was born into the middle class because my grandfather was able to enter the Civilian Conservation Corps as a part of Roosevelt's New Deal—a program largely unavailable to black folks. This elevated him and his descendants from poverty to the middle class. Other white families became middle class because of housing developments after WWII that were largely unavailable to blacks. Those opportunities created generational wealth for white families. Not for black families.

Back to the ICCC meeting. I was invited to preach on Monday. I accepted. And in accepting the invitation to preach before these friends, I knew that I had to confess my prior ignorance. I knew that I had to admit to them that I previously thought racism was irrelevant—just a story from the history books. But that I had evolved. So I confessed my truth to them. And they were so affirming as I confessed my ignorance to them, and as I asked them to help me find the courage to speak up for racial justice. For the courage to name injustice when I see it. And now that the scales have been pulled from my eyes, I see it everywhere.

***Just because it's the law doesn't mean it's just.***

That was Monday.

The closing worship on Thursday of ICCC is always the youth-led worship. I went in with minimal expectations, ready to offer encouragement and support to the young people, but not expecting to get much out of it. Once again, I was wrong. (Why is this a theme here?) Throughout the worship service, 17-year-old Morgan Bakaletz composed an artistic rendering that she entitled "Rise and Resist."



Here's what Morgan wrote about the piece she drew in real time:

*This piece is about social justice and injustice—where it is and where it isn't. The piece as a whole symbolizes the sun. The hands are the rays and the bottom semi-circle is the center of the sun. I chose to start the center of the sun in charcoal because this world, from a distance, is hate-filled and impoverished. But I believe that up close we can connect through kindness, shown through the honey yellow on the edges of the sun, connecting through kindness.*

That drawing will soon reside here at the Chapel, as it was auctioned off, and Mr. Don Prokes from our church was so inspired by the rendering that he offered the winning bid!

During the same worship service, some of the young people performed an interpretive dance to a song by Mandisa; I haven't listened to Mandisa since she was a contestant on American Idol. As Morgan continued to draw, and the young people danced, the words of Mandisa's song pierced my cynical heart:

*We all bleed the same  
We're more beautiful when we come together  
We all bleed the same  
So tell me why, tell me why  
We're divided*

As the music played and the artist drew and the dancers danced—I was moved. Surprising tears welled in my eyes. The lyrics continued:

*Woke up today  
Another headline  
Another innocent life is taken  
In the name of hatred  
So hard to take  
And if we think that it's all good  
Then we're mistaken  
'Cause my heart is breaking*

Later that same day, after teenagers drew and danced and sang "We All Bleed the Same," far away in Clearwater, Florida, a white man shot and killed a black man in the chest over a parking spot dispute. Another Florida "Stand Your Ground" shooting. Like Mandisa, "my heart is breaking." The song continues:

*Are you left? Are you right?  
Pointing fingers, taking sides  
When are we gonna realize?  
We all bleed the same*

***Just because it's the law doesn't mean it's just.***

The song continues:

*If we're gonna fight  
Let's fight for each other  
If we're gonna shout  
Let love be the cry*

*We all bleed the same*

When asked about the inspiration for the lyrics, Mandisa, said, "My heart was broken at the state of our country. I felt like we were all fighting against one another. We just couldn't get along." Then she quoted from scripture (2 Chronicles 7:14):

*"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

As we walk in humility, may each of us be willing to let God evolve us. Healing this great land starts with you. It starts with me.

I close with lyrics to another song, one likely familiar to you:

*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*