

Every so often, in the course of human events, something happens in history or society that scholars find so momentous that they label it a “paradigm shift.” A paradigm shift means that people have adopted a new way of seeing or understanding themselves, the world, and even the universe. So when your paradigm starts to shift, watch out. A good example would be the shift from the belief in many gods (called polytheism) to a belief in one God who created the whole ball of wax (called monotheism). It was, of course, our spiritual ancestors, the Hebrews, whom we can credit with this shift. They believed that their God, Yahweh, was the one and only true God; and they believed that Yahweh was the God who created and sustains the world and who even acts within history to lead and sustain God’s people. This view was a radical shift from the beliefs and practices of all the peoples and nations who surrounded the Hebrews. It was, so to say, a new paradigm; a new way of thinking and believing.

Another such paradigm shift occurred in the middle ages with the discoveries of scientists named Copernicus, and later Galileo. These men taught that the earth was not the center of the universe. To the contrary, they taught that the earth was one planet among others that revolved around the sun. It is hard for us to imagine what a furor this caused in scientific and

religious circles. Galileo, a devout Roman Catholic, was put on trial for and convicted of teaching heresy. He lived the rest of his life under house arrest because he refused to recant what he knew to be the truth about the universe. For years the church could not come to terms with the fact that apparently God did not create human beings to be the central figures in the universe around which everything else revolved. Today, of course, we don't think twice about the fact that our small remote planet is part of a small and remote solar system in a small and remote corner of the universe. In the middle ages, that was a new way of thinking about and seeing the universe.

Still another so-called paradigm shift occurred right here in our own country in the year 1776. Remember what happened that year in a place called Philadelphia? Some American leaders got together to discuss the possibility of severing the ties between the American colonies and the motherland of Great Britain. One of those leaders wrote a paper called the Declaration of Independence in which he said that God created "men" with certain inalienable rights, among which are the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He further stated that because of those rights, men are entitled by God to govern themselves. That was another paradigm shift. Up to that point, most people, at least in Europe, believed that Kings ruled by divine right. Now these uppity Americans threw that idea out the window

and said that it is the God given right of people to decide for themselves what sort of government they would have. We may not see it as such a radical way of thinking now, but back then, it was a whole new way of thinking and believing. It was indeed a paradigm shift.

I present this rather sweeping overview of history simply as background to aid our understanding of what is happening in the early Christian church as it is reported to us in the Acts of the Apostles today. As a result of the Feast of Pentecost, the first Christians recognized that God's love and grace are not the property of a privileged small group of people—namely, the Jews. Instead God's love and grace are offered to the whole world, to Jews and non-Jews alike. Not only that, the apostle Peter had a weird and strange vision which convinced him that to be a Christian, a non-Jew didn't even have to become a Jew first.

In his vision Peter saw a sheet being lowered down out of heaven. On this sheet were all the unclean creatures that Jews were not supposed to eat; things like pigs and clams. Upon seeing these creatures a voice commanded Peter to “kill and eat.” Peter essentially responded, “Who me? I'm not touching that vile stuff.” As a result of this vision, Peter learned that the non-Jews, or gentiles, as they were called, got a “get out of jail free card.” According to Peter's vision, the gentiles were allowed to by-pass the Jewish

law and commandments altogether and could be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit simply for the asking.

We can hardly imagine what a radical idea that was for the first Christians, all of whom were practicing Jews. It truly was a paradigm shift. Peter, like the rest of the apostles, didn't see themselves as starting a whole new religion. They thought they were still all Jews and had to live as Jews, which included being circumcised if you were a man, and eating kosher, which of course meant no roast ham dinners at Easter, or clam-bakes in the backyard during summer vacation. As a result of Peter's vision, all this changed. He and the church had to see things in a whole new way; it was a new way of thinking and believing. And it is because of this that we Christians can enjoy those broiled scallop dinners at Pickets after church on Sunday.

Depending on your point of view, all this is either bad news or good news. For me, the bottom line is that God can and does do a new thing, frequently dragging us along kicking and screaming. Think of the ordination of women a generation ago in the Episcopal Church. Today we are the first branch of the Anglican Communion to have a woman as Presiding Bishop. (And if you want to find out more about this remarkable woman, just ask Jennifer Martin who a week ago spent an hour in the same

car with her.) For many parts of the Anglican Communion, having a woman as Presiding Bishop is a paradigm shift that they still cannot fathom. As is so often the case, it is the Americans who are the trailblazers, leading the way to a new way of seeing, thinking and believing.

No one can imagine where God is leading the church and the world. Jesus called it “the kingdom of God.” Frequently change is painful; it stretches and pulls us into new ways of thinking, seeing and believing. The apostle Peter was stretched and because he adapted to the new ways instead of resisting, the church of Jesus Christ fanned out through the world, bringing the message of God’s love and grace to all who would say yes, with no Jewish strings attached. I pray that God will continue to lead us and the church to new insights and give us, like Peter, the grace to follow that lead; and to accept those shifts in thinking and believing that bring us closer to the life giving freedom of the kingdom of God.