

ARE YOU MOVABLE?

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Grace Church in New York
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But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 11:9)

Doris Kearns Goodwin is an American historian and Pulitzer Prize winning author. Of all of her books, my favorite is entitled, *Wait Till Next Year*. It's a memoir of her childhood in Rockville Centre, Long Island. The time was the 1940s and 50s, and the twin pillars that supported the identity of the Kearns family were the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Roman Catholic Church. Young Doris loved the hometown Dodgers, and knew the players by heart. She would listen to the games on the radio, and keep score of how every batter performed at the plate so that she could provide an inning-by-inning replay for her father when he came home from work.

Doris also loved the rituals and rhythms of St. Agnes Church, a towering stone gothic structure that looks like a cathedral. She delighted in the annual cycle of liturgical feasts and festivals that took place within it. At age seven she began First Communion classes, and applied herself to learning the difference between venial and mortal sins. Keeping track of which was which was almost as fascinating as keeping score of the Dodger games. Doris was a diligent disciple of church and baseball, and they both worked together. Until they didn't. Soon her true loyalty would be put to the test.

It so happened that the great catcher of the Brooklyn Dodgers – Roy Campanella – was coming to Rockville Centre to speak at a benefit function. Doris desperately wanted to go and be in the close personal presence of one of her heroes. Then, to her dismay, she learned that Campanella would deliver his speech at the Episcopal church just down the block from St. Agnes. Sadly, the nuns had been perfectly clear that it was a sin for a Roman Catholic even to enter such a profane house of heresy as the local Episcopal church. What should she do: not go and preserve her immortal soul, or go and knowingly commit a sin? Her father assured her that listening to a baseball player in a Protestant parish hall was not a sin, so Doris decided to risk it and attend with her father. She enjoyed Campanella's talk, but for weeks she was stuck in the notion that she had defiled herself and dishonored God. She walked around in dread of what the divine consequences might be.

People get stuck in all sorts of ideas about what is sacred and what is profane. What is a sin and what isn't? In today's reading from the Book of Acts (11:1-18) we hear the Apostle Peter tell the story of how the Spirit of God freed him from being stuck – stuck in his old understanding of what was sacred and what was profane. Peter is perhaps the best known of the disciples who walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Throughout the Gospels we see that Peter was part of the inner circle with James and John. Peter was impulsive, opinionated, and fiercely loyal. He was a fisherman when Jesus first called him to follow, so I've always imagined him to be more of a rugged outdoorsman than someone concerned with keeping his fingernails clean.

Nevertheless, Peter was a Jew and therefore abided by the Law of Moses as his people interpreted it at the time. Apparently, he was a stickler for keeping the Law's finer points. Certain foods and people were unclean. Then as now, Jews were not to eat pork, shellfish, or insects. They were not to mix meat and dairy. Concerning unclean people, certain types of sinners always qualified, but at the top of every list would be the Gentiles – any non-Jew. Could a Gentile share in the promises that God had made to Israel? Many scholarly, conservative Jews of the time

thought the likelihood was highly doubtful. Therefore, it was best simply to avoid the Gentiles as much as possible. Don't even darken their doorways, to say nothing of entering their heretical houses of worship. To do so would be a sin. To do so would be to risk divine consequences, even losing their status as God's chosen people.

The Book of Acts, as you likely know, tells the story of the early church in the years immediately following the Resurrection. The Christian movement, or, "the Way," as it was called, was straining to expand beyond its origins. Would the Christ followers be merely a small, local sect of Judaism in Jerusalem, or would they be the way God reached out to the known world throughout the Mediterranean? Certain individuals would be key. Saul of Tarsus was one of them. Peter was another. If Peter remained stuck in his old notions of who was clean and who wasn't, the spread of the Gospel would be hindered. But if Peter proved movable – if Peter could be freed from the attitudes that confined him, then the Spirit of God would be able to work powerfully through him to reach the Gentile world with the good news of Jesus.

Today we've heard the story of Peter's vision as he prayed in the city of Joppa. He saw *something descending, like a great sheet let down from heaven by four corners*. Inside he saw *animals and beasts of prey and reptiles*. Essentially, inside the sheet was everything Jews were not supposed to eat. But Peter heard a voice commanding him to do just that: "*Get up, Peter, kill and eat.*" Peter protested: "*By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*" But the voice of the Lord declared, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" Would the voice of the Lord be sufficient to move Peter in a new direction? Would the vision unstick him from his prejudiced assumptions? Saul had already responded to Jesus in what came to be called his "Damascus Road experience," and was now reaching out to the Gentiles as Paul the Apostle. If Peter were able to move, perhaps he could call his moment of conversion his "vision of creepy, crawly things at Joppa."

Let me tell you about a recent shift in attitude of my own. It wasn't exactly a vision, but close to it. You know that lately we have been talking much about the historic choir stalls in the chancel. To celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Grace Church choir and school we have been raising money to restore all the chancel furniture that arrived here in 1902. The choir stalls are an outward and visible sign of our identity. They are beautiful, solid, and useful. They convey gravitas; *what* is being sung is important, as well as *who* is singing it. Therefore, I was annoyed all of last week every time I walked through the church. Why? Well, it was the week of the Grace Church Choral Society concert and the tidy rows of choir stalls were pushed aside. In their place was a jumble of common chairs to accommodate an orchestra. As for the chairs, I want to say one word to you. Just one word: plastic. Plastic chairs in the chancel of Grace Church are like the Starbucks cup on the set of Games of Thrones. They are out of place. They are inauthentic and don't converse well with the surrounding architecture. They are profane, cheap, tawdry. By no means, Lord! Thus I reasoned with myself, all the while simmering inside, but maintaining my cheerful exterior, of course.

Then came the concert on Friday evening – Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. It was my job to quiet the full house, welcome people, and introduce the conductor, John McClay. After returning to my pew I looked and saw the 39-piece orchestra arranged in the chancel. Behind them stood the 150 members of the Choral Society. Above them all was the mosaic of Jesus with outstretched arms, as if to suggest, "These are all members of my family." The third movement of the mass was *Credo* – "I believe." I know for a fact that certain members of the Choral Society struggle to believe in God, if they believe at all. Yet there they were singing that they do. It struck me that singing in this concert was as close to participating in church as many of them will ever come, and the evening wouldn't have been possible if the furniture were bolted to the floor. The choir stalls are beautiful, solid, and they are especially useful because they are movable. I learned this week that the French word for furniture is *meubles*. (Apologies for the mispronunciation. Too bad the

word isn't *baguette*, because that's a French word I know.) I'm told that the literal English translation of *meubles* is movable, or mobile. Furniture is meant to be rearranged from time to time. Will I still be semi-annoyed whenever the choir stalls are moved? Yes. But move them we shall under certain conditions, and we'll restore them again in another 125 years. All the more reason to claim your naming opportunity now before June 9th. Don't delay. They are moving fast.

But enough about me, what about Peter? Was the Spirit of God able to dislodge Peter from his place of immobility? The Spirit was able. The Book of Acts tells two versions of the same incident. The other account (10:9-23) reveals that Peter was perplexed by the meaning of the vision. Eventually he realized that God was releasing him from the narrow definitions of what was clean. God was erasing the distinction between sacred and profane. Indeed, if the sheet came down from heaven and went back up to heaven, then everything in it was of heaven. Thus, Peter could move on in the mission to the Gentiles, specifically, to the house of a man named Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile, a soldier in the Roman army. God's desire was that he, too, should share in the promises made to Israel.

Move on, Peter. Go to Cornelius. Dine with the Gentiles. The new command of the Lord was entirely consistent with what he had heard from Jesus at the last supper (John 13:31-35): *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* What God cares about is that we love one another. What God does not care for, I suspect, are all the dietary restrictions and denominational differences by which we say that some are members of God's family and some are not. Move on, Peter. Go to Cornelius. If he happens to be serving grilled shrimp wrapped in bacon, eat it and tell him about Jesus.

Peter was movable. Peter's vision of creepy, crawly things opened his eyes, so much so that he was able to write (Acts 10:34-35): *Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.* We are all members of God's family. But what's going on these days in Rockville Centre, Long Island? I confess that I've never been there but I was moved this week to visit the website of the Episcopal church that Doris Kearns Goodwin thought was a sin to enter. The Church of the Ascension appears to be humming along in the original wood frame structure they built in 1888 and enlarged in 1942. Apparently, they are an Anglo-Catholic parish, which means if you didn't know better, you'd think you were in a Roman Catholic church. They wear lacy vestments and call the Eucharist the Mass. At certain times of the year they place a statue of Mary on a shoulder-mounted platform between two acolytes and take her for little rides around the nave. Yes, it's an Episcopal Church, but it looks to me like those pre-Vatican II nuns would have felt right at home.

As for St. Agnes Church, they too have a website. Long ago the church was elevated to cathedral status, and it's now St. Agnes Cathedral. In their history section I note with interest some events from 1981-82, specifically: *Plans are announced for a major renovation of St. Agnes Cathedral. A temporary chapel is erected in the parking lot for daily Masses during the renovation work. During Lent, St Agnes Parishioners and others begin attending daily Masses in the Episcopal Church of the Ascension at the gracious invitation of The Venerable Donald C. Latham, as the temporary "Lady Chapel" in the parking lot proves too small for Lenten communicants.*

Hear the sentence again: *During Lent, St Agnes Parishioners and others begin attending daily Masses in the Episcopal Church of the Ascension.* It is something Doris Kearns Goodwin couldn't have imagined as a little girl growing up in Rockville Centre. Roman Catholics attending daily Mass in an Episcopal Church? By no means, Lord! Wait till next year. No, next year had arrived. Imagine: we are all members of God's family. And the challenge is this: *What God has made clean, we must not call profane.*