Sixth Sunday of Easter All Saints’ Church

May 10, 2015 Year B

Acts 10:44-48 1 John 5:1-6

Psalm 98 John 15: 9-17

On my flight from London to Cairo, I met a Coptic Bishop of Cairo- Bishop Biemen (I found out later that he has his own Facebook page). I was attracted to his “hoodie” which was laced with Coptic crosses in a beautiful meshed fabric. He had a full gray beard and a smile in his eye. We struck up a conversation and he gave me his phone number and invited me to church. I never called him, but his warm welcome gave me the courage to go to St. George’s Church in Zamalek, the Cairo neighborhood of my hotel.

Sunday morning in Egypt is like a Monday morning here- the start of the work week. So, I was surprised that the service was *so* long- from 9:00-11:30 am, with over 200 people in church. I arrived around 10:15 and slipped into the back pew, on the women’s side, and donned my head scarf.

In the front nave of the east facing church was a partition, called an Iconostasis (icon stand) with three large openings, referred to as the “beautiful gates.” Behind the south gate, I could see through the opening, an altar, circled by many priests and acolytes- they were in the process of praying the Eucharistic prayer.

It was a long prayer- at least a half an hour; I could see some movements, but mostly I was carried by the chanting, the rhythm of the cymbals, and the incense (“smells and bells” as some have used to describe a high Episcopal Church service). The language I could tell was not in Arabic, but rather in Coptic, an almost extinct language- referred to as the language of the Pharaohs. The chanting was melodic and drew me in.

I stood, knelt and sat as the congregation moved with the prayers. Three women, older, dressed in black, left their seats to move to the front. They were moving quickly.

At the same time the priests were moving away from the altar. And then all of a sudden, the drape was pulled back from the center gate, and the Celebrant lifted up a large ringed circle of bread. Another priest lifted up a huge chalice of wine (I have never seen a chalice so large).

And then, at the presentation of the bread and the wine, there were gasps from the congregation (so cool).

Two little girls were taking off their shoes and they ran up, holding hands, to the front of the church. “How sweet,” I thought, “they feel so at home.”

But then I noticed that many people were taking off their shoes as they walked up to the front of the church.

“Ah, ha,” I thought, “you are approaching holy ground- take off your shoes.”

And so I took off my shoes, which meant I was barefoot.

As it became my turn to receive, I followed everyone else and opened my mouth as I approached. The Celebrant broke off a chunk of bread and placed it on my tongue. I walked down the center aisle, and came to the chalice. The priest dipped a spoon into the wine, and then without touching my mouth with his hand or spoon, flipped the wine onto my tongue. It was sweet and pungent and sour.

Everything was so familiar and so foreign.

I went back to my seat in the back pew, and soon the communion was whisked away and the Celebrant came out with a large pitcher of water, which was carried by an acolyte.

He walked down the aisle, taking fists of water and flinging his arm (almost violently), spraying water over the congregation. I was near the center aisle. I got drenched.

The Celebrant was drenched as well. The acolyte handed him a towel and he dried himself and then blessed the congregation.

I crossed myself. Barefoot, drenched and blessed, I could feel tears stream down my face.

I felt connected. To All Saints’- to all of you, my church family. To all of Christendom. To my Muslim families that were taking care of me. And to my baptism.

I moved beyond myself, yet was grounded in myself. In a familiar, yet very foreign space, I felt the touch of God’s spirit, an experience of the Holy Spirit.

Just as this experience in St. George’s, Cairo, invited me be touched by the Holy Spirit, so does our reading from the Book of Acts- there is conversion happening at the hand of the Holy Spirit.

Peter and Cornelius have separate visions. Cornelius, a God-fearing man, in prayer and in deeds loves the Lord. He is not a Jew, and God comes to him and tells him that “his prayers and deeds have ascended to the heavens like a memorial.” God reveals God’s self to Cornelius- in a theophany, a showing forth of God’s glory, and tells Cornelius to “call for Peter to come to you.”

Meanwhile, Peter has a dream about what is clean and unclean. He interprets the dream that “it’s ok by God” to associate with Cornelius, even though he is unclean. So he responds to Cornelius’ beckoning and goes to him.

Peter cannot imagine- it’s beyond his experience- that Cornelius would have his own experience with God. He thinks he has been given permission to preach to Cornelius, to a Gentile, who will hopefully be so moved that he will become first a Jew and then a Christian. Peter knows he must follow God’s rules, and these are God’s rules.

What a surprise, then, in the middle of Peter’s preaching of salvation history, Peter doesn’t even get to finish.

The Holy Spirit interrupts him. Cornelius, his family, his friends are speaking in tongues- without any of Peter’s predetermined process.

Peter says, “Can anyone hold back baptism?” Good question, Peter, especially, since all those before you are already filled with the Holy Spirit!

God is making something new, beyond both Peter and Cornelius, yet each needing the other:

\*\*God does not play favorites, \*\*Universal Salvation is of God and from God, \*\*In Jesus, God destroys all barriers, \*\*Love produces love (If love exists, there is no fear), and \*\*We do not claim God; God claims us and in response, we are grateful. We live grateful lives, not just with the right attitude, but with the right action.

We act. Peter says, “Baptize these folks.” There is nothing else that is required, but this. Peter could not have done otherwise. It’s the response to the Holy Spirit, and it brings intimacy, and a joy, complete, because we are being known and we are being seen, and in that we are also knowing and seeing the other…. We are really experiencing each other. Barefoot, drenched and blessed. How powerful!

This passage in Acts is often called, “The Conversion of Cornelius” and indeed, that is what it is. But it is also “The Conversion of Peter.” And our response, like the psalmist in today’s reading, is to “sing a new song to God who has done marvelous things.”

I am reminded by both these stories in Acts and in Cairo of the beauty of our community of All Saints’.

We are rich in the diversity of all the ways we are with each other- we come from different political persuasions, different family backgrounds, and different educational experiences. We are families, singles, and children all finding our way to live deep and meaningful lives. I think sometimes, we take for granted how well we can live together so peacefully, and yet be so different. Most places in the world do not have this luxury. One way to celebrate our privilege, our peace within our diversity, is to get to know each other better.

One of the most pressing concerns that parishioners at All Saints’ expressed through its church profile was to have the opportunity to come together as one church and to celebrate who you are as one Church. In that vein, I would like to propose our own study group. You have been so supportive of me, as I have studied this year both in South Africa and Egyp; I would like to bring the spirit of study, home.

This summer, I would like to have one church service at 9:00 am, alternating evenly between Rite I, Rite II and Rite Now. Starting June 21st through Labor Day Weekend, which is 12 Sundays, we will have the opportunity to share with each other what makes our specific service special to us, while at the same time learn how others in our community pray.

This summer will give us the gift to know and to be known. To give the Holy Spirit a chance to make something new for us- to explore and to give value to each other and to celebrate breaking of bread and wine together as One Church in the midst of all our different ways of praying.

And to experience how we are baptized into the Christ, to see, hear and speak with the eyes, ears and words of Christ, and to feel the beat of the sacred heart of Christ, within and without. AMEN.