

THE GAZELLE FACTOR

Acts 9:31-43

What ever shall we do
with this old crippled Latino
who won't stay in bed
and this uppity gazelle woman
who won't stay dead?

Their stories are an embarrassment to the church, you know...

an embarrassment and

an inspiration.

We don't tell these stories to just anyone.
They're inside stories
Stories mostly for the church family.
Some of our stories we want to tell everyone:

Like the story of Christmas...

In those days a decree went out...

from Caesar Augustus...

Like the story of the prodigal son...

Once there was a man who had two sons...

the younger said...

Like the story of Easter...

Early in the morning on the first day of the week...

the women...

Those are church family stories we tell everyone.

Some of our church family stories, though,

we save for the family.

People outside the family

couldn't possibly understand them...

or appreciate them...

like the stories of the old crippled Latino

who wouldn't stay in bed;

and the uppity gazelle woman

who wouldn't stay dead.

We save those stories and tell them to the church family

when the church family needs an added measure

of confidence...

confidence in the power of our risen Lord

working in *us*

and among *us*.

Speaking of the need for a confident church,
it reminds me of a cover article
from *Atlantic Monthly* I clipped maybe a decade or so ago
and saved someplace.

It's a well done and frightening article
that's turning out to be quite prophetic.
It claims that diversity in this nation is a myth.
The article argued at that time
that the only way to survive in this country
is for all minorities
to act like the majority,
which is to say,
everyone must act like
an American version of the English.

As an old Scot,
ten years or so ago, when the article first came out,
I found the thought of having to act like the English
more than a bit amusing if not unsettling; but
according to the article,
anything short of such conformity
would surely end in violence...
as in the middle east and Rwanda and the former Soviet Union
and the Sudan, and almost anywhere else you can name.¹

I'm not well enough versed in such matters to engage the debate,
but as the mix in this melting pot gets more and more
ethnically and racially and religiously diverse,
we do see tension growing.

I now no longer find the truth of the article both amusing and unsettling.
I now find it only unsettling.

I suspect, however, even now, the truth of the article is not the whole truth.
It is certainly not the truth of the church...
at least not truth for the church
when the church is being the church.

In the church
if we are not diverse
we are not anything...at least not anything unique to our calling:

One body, many members;
One vine, many branches;
One Spirit, many gifts;
One Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of us *all*....
That's our unity in diversity and

those are some of the key images the Bible uses for us.

Diverse is what we are if we are the church of Jesus Christ.

If we can be confident in our diversity,
united in Christ,
do you see how the nation needs us
and needs us to be confident in who we are
and needs us to be faithful to our purpose?

I'm getting ahead of myself.

We were talking about the inside church family stories
of the old crippled Latino who wouldn't stay in bed
and the gazelle woman who wouldn't stay dead.

They are embarrassing stories.

We can't really explain them.

We have a story like that in our family.

It comes from my mother's side.

It's about Cousin Estelle Fleming.

Exactly how Cousin Estelle was my cousin I'm not sure.

She died a lot of years before I was born.

In fact, my mother was barely old enough to attest to the story's authenticity.

What I remember is that at family gatherings

when my mother would tell the story of Cousin Estelle Fleming
my grandmother would say to my mother,

"Now, Rebecca, you mustn't tell that story outside the family."

According to the family story,

Cousin Estelle Fleming lived and died
over in Greenwood County.

In fact,

according to our family story,
Cousin Estelle Fleming died twice
in Greenwood County.

It seems,

the first time Cousin Estelle died
they laid her out in the parlor to cool,
as it were.

It was the custom in those days.

Her grave had already been dug and everything.

Cousin Estelle was several days laid out in the parlor in her casket
when,

on the night in question,
those designated to sit up with Cousin Estelle while she cooled
noticed her eyelids began to flutter.

It got their attention.
They ran to wake her husband, Cousin Crisvil.
By the time Cousin Crisvil got to the parlor
Cousin Estelle was sitting up in her casket
and clapping her hands for joy.

"Crisvil," she exclaimed,
"I've seen your mother."

"Now, now, Dear,"
Cousin Crisvil is reported to have said.
"You've had a hard few days."
(that's the way it was told me)

I don't know what to make of that story.
I certainly can't explain it.
All I know is,
according to the story,
Cousin Estelle went on to live *several* more years
on the Greenwood County side of paradise.²

Do you see why my grandmother thought that story
shouldn't be told
outside the family?
It's an embarrassment.
Folks might think we're *peculiar*.

I'm sure you won't tell anyone, will you?

My inside family story of Cousin Estelle Fleming
doesn't go anywhere, really,
except to that lexicon of tall-tales
to be told and retold
at Thanksgiving, Christmas and family reunions.
It's just one of those stories that identifies us as family.

Not so these other inside-family stories...
these inside-*church*-family stories...
this story of the old crippled Latino who wouldn't stay in bed
and this story of the uppity gazelle woman who wouldn't stay dead.

These church-family stories go places.
They're stories that have lives of their own.
They take us to places we can't even imagine.

They are two of those stories

of how the ministry of our Lord
was given into the hands of the church.

We can't explain them.
We don't even understand them;
but we somehow know they are true.
More than that,
they help define who we are.
They are two of those stories we tell
when the church needs a little *self-confidence*.
The way the church gets self-confidence
is by remembering how the power of the church
comes from the Spirit of the risen Lord
living in *our* midst.

Speaking of the church confident in the Spirit of the living Lord,
it has been reported,
maybe it was on NPR,
that an opinion poll has now proved
what we've suspected for some time.

I can't quite remember how the question was put;
and I may be getting some of the particulars wrong.

Most of my radio listening is done while driving
so I couldn't make a note,
but the gist of the finding is
that the lack of *honesty*
is the greatest single *political* concern
of the American people.

We can't tell when our leaders are telling us the truth.

Do you see how the nation needs the church;
and how the nation needs for the church to be confident
in who and what God called us to be?

In the church,
when we are the church,
it is truth that sets us free;
and our confidence is in the risen Lord who is truth.

I do not wish to make trivial something so grand as truth;
but perhaps it is in the small picture
that the grand picture comes into focus.

Let me tell you what I mean.
We had some windows broken out of the Idlewild Church in Memphis
not long before I left there to start this interim trekking.
They were broken out by vandals.
The insurance company had us get an estimate
on the cost of getting them replaced.

The Property Committee got the estimate.
The office manager phoned it in.
The insurance company approved the estimate.

In the meantime, however,
 a late bidder came in with a lower price
 and, since there appeared to be no collusion,
 we let the contract for the lower bid.
When the insurance check came at the higher figure,
 the office manager,
 sent the extra money back to the insurance company.
Well, I want you to know
 the insurance company didn't know what to do with it.
They didn't know how to respond to honesty.
"We'll have to get back to you on this one," they said.

Do you see in that small matter
 how in matters large and small
 the nation needs the church?
Do you see in that small matter
 how in matters large and small
 the church must have self-confidence?
Do you see in that small matter
 how in matters large and small
 the church must get its confidence from the risen Lord
 who is truth?
I've gotten ahead of myself again, haven't I?
I must get back to these inside-church-family stories.
The old crippled Latino's name was *Aeneas*.
What he was doing in Lydda is anybody's guess..
Beyond any reasonable doubt
 Aeneas, the main characters in the story,
 was named for the hero in Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*.
The literary value of that name
 would not have been lost on first century readers of this story.
It shouldn't be lost on us either.
Do you remember,
 in Virgil's famous poem,
 Aeneas survived the Trojan War and,
 after many adventures,
 Aeneas became the father of the Roman people.³

The story of Simon Peter,
 as a representative of the then infant church,
 getting a man named Aeneas off of his sick bed
 is a powerful story.
 It was a powerful story for the infant church
 that had no power save in its Lord;

and it is a powerful story for the church now no longer an infant
but a church returning to an era of diminished influence
in this or any culture.

There's nothing diminished
about getting a man named Aeneas off his sick bed.
This is a story that says
the ministry of the church of the risen Christ
is going places...
important places...
places we can't even imagine.

The story of Aeneas is a story
in which we see the power of the church
is in the Spirit of the risen Christ
moving in and among us
to do important things...
to participate in world-changing matters of consequence.

It's an inside-the-church family story.
Let's tell it to each other any time we get discouraged
or think the church and its faith are unimportant.
Speaking of discouraged,

they say young families are discouraged now,
as never before,
about the future of their children;

they say voters are more discouraged,
than ever before,
about the political future of our red state-blue state divided nation;

they say the baby boomers are discouraged,
as never before,
about the prospects of having adequate retirement income;

they say health care professionals are discouraged,
more and more,
about the future of medical care for all people;

they say educators are discouraged
more and more every day,
about public investment in public education,

they say just about everybody is discouraged
more and more every day
that the possibility of peace seems more and more remote,

they say the mainline denominations are discouraged
about whether we can survive all our internecine infighting.

That's a lot of discouragement;
but, then,
I keep getting ahead of myself.
On this visit to the text
we're talking about *name*.

In the stories of the old Latino and the uppity woman
the uppity woman's name in Aramaic was *Tabatha*
and in Greek it was *Dorcas*.

Either way, Tabatha or Dorcas,
her name means *gazelle*.

In case you haven't been to the zoo recently,
a gazelle is a deer like animal
with particularly fetching eyes.

See what I mean by uppity!?

Nobody could keep the gazelle woman still.

As everybody knows,
in the first century
everywhere except in the church
women were not held in very high regard.

In fact,
except in the church,
about the only way a woman could get by in the first century
was to have a man to take care of her.

That meant
if you were a widow
you didn't stand much of a chance.

In the first century
widows had every right to be the most hopeless and discouraged people in town;
but
this gazelle woman would have none of it.

Why she ran around here and there
so fast you couldn't catch her
and,
do you know what she did????

Why, of all things, she organized the *widows*...

yes, you heard it right...
Gazelle took the most hopeless and discouraged people in town
and organized them...
got them together;
and, united in their faith,
the widows...

well, the widows
developed a welfare system...

and it worked...
they found a way to take care of each other
and others in the community as well, I bet.

In this inside-church-family story
Simon Peter, representing the Church of Jesus Christ,
would not let the woman named Gazelle remain dead.

We can't explain that story.
We have come to believe, however,
that the Church of the Risen Christ
can
and must
keep the most discouraged among us
from giving up hope...

and we must show them,
dramatically if need be,
the reasons they can remain hopeful.

As I said,
my family story about Cousin Estelle
doesn't get us anywhere
except to the family reunion.
But these *church*-family stories...
these stories of Aeneas and Gazelle...
are stories that get us going
and take us places.

We can't explain them, you know?
We don't know how it all happened.
If we could explain them we'd ruin them for sure
so we shouldn't even try.
If you have or think you have
some scientific explanation for what happened to Aeneas and Gazelle,
kindly keep it to yourself.
What *we* know is
that the power of the church
is from the Spirit of the living Christ
moving in and among you.
Rather than try to explain the stories of Aeneas and Gazelle
maybe we should just keep on telling them to each other...

just kind of keep on telling them from time to time...

especially when the church-family is together
and maybe feeling a little unimportant
or maybe just a little discouraged.
or a little bit unimportant and discouraged.

You know.
Just re-tell the story.
Kind of like this:

"Do you member that story of how ole Simon Peter
was wandering around here and there
just as happy as if he had good sense
so excited he couldn't sit still;
and he came up on an old crippled Latino over in Lydda?
"There's no telling what that ole Latino was doing in Lydda,
But his name was Aeneas...like in Virgil's poem,
don't you know?...the father of the Roman people;
and ole Simon Peter said,

 `Aeneas,...in the name of Jesus, get out of bed!'...

just like that;
and Aeneas jumped (!) up out of bed.
They say he hadn't been out of bed in eight years!!!"

"Yea, I remember that one...
the way I heard
it was just a day or so before Dorcas died...
Dorcas means *gazelle*
don't you know....
anyway Dorcas just died outright...
as dead as anybody ever was dead...
laid out in the upper room and everything;
and the widows were weepin' and moanin' and
and carryin' on every which-a-way.
Right off they sent for Simon
and he came straight way.
When he got there he prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed.
They say ole Simon Peter could just about out pray anybody; and

 first thing you know,
 Dorcas was up scattin' about
 just like a gazelle.

Church couldn't let the widows be discouraged,
now could we."

At least
that's the way it was told to me.

James S. Lowry
Oakland Avenue Church
July 23, 2006

END NOTES

1

. Benjamin Schwartz, "The Diversity Myth: America's Leading Export," Vol. 275, No. 5, May 1995. 57 ff

². The story of the death(s) of Cousin Estelle Fleming appears also in my sermon, *Paradise Painted In Earth Tones* (#664) written for the Mount Pleasant Church and preached there on August 14, 1988. I also preached it at First Church Beaufort, South Carolina, on August 28, 1988, on the occasion of the installation of Ralph McCaskill as the pastor of that church. The story in the earlier sermon, as suggested by its title, was used to make an altogether different point.

³. Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, and Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year C*, Westminster/John Knox, 1994. 296