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The Overview Effect

Easter 5

May 18, 2025

Acts 11:1-18

In December of 1972, from a distance of 18,000 miles, the crew of Apollo 17 took what would become the most famous photograph ever taken of the Earth. You are likely to know this photograph as the Blue Marble, that hauntingly beautiful image of a blue ball swaddled in swirling clouds. The swirls make it look like a child's marble, but if you know what to look for you can clearly make out the coastline of Africa and the polar ice cap.

Many astronauts who have seen the Earth from space report a radically changed outlook, an awareness of the fragility and beauty of our planet they didn't have before. Space philosopher Frank White coined the phrase overview effect to describe this phenomenon and wrote a book of the same name based on his interviews with astronauts.

Rusty Schweickart, on the crew of Apollo 9, had such an experience. The year was 1963; the Apollo spacecraft orbited the Earth for ten days making one rotation every hour and a half. Among his assignments was testing a new life-supporting spacesuit.

Imagine that being your assignment. You are floating outside your spacecraft; the silence is absolute and everything is totally black, except for the one "shining gem" that is our planet. Looking back on the earth from this vantage point Schweickart was so overcome that he wanted to "hug and kiss that gem like a mother does her firstborn child." ("The Thoroughly Modern Mysticism of Matthew Fox," Wayne Boulton in *Christian Century*, April 28, 1990)

He would later describe his experience this way: “. . . the contrast between that bright blue and white Christmas tree ornament and the black sky, that infinite universe, really comes through—the size of it, the significance of it. It is so small and so fragile and such a precious little spot in the universe.... And you realize that on that small spot, that little blue and white thing, is everything that means anything to you—all love, tears, joy . . . all of it on that little spot out there that you can cover with your thumb. And you realize that you’ve changed, ... there’s something new there, ... the relationship is no longer what it was.” (excerpted from “No Frames, No Boundaries,” Russell Schweickart in *In Context*, Summer 1983)

Today’s lesson from the 11th chapter of Acts is the second part of a longer story which begins in chapter 10. It’s a convoluted story; and to tell you the truth I’ve had trouble keeping it straight myself. So stay with me for a minute. A Roman Centurion named Cornelius, a devout man and a Gentile, has a vision while he is praying. An angel tells him to send for a man he doesn’t even know, who, it turns out, is none other than Peter. Meanwhile, as the envoy is on their way to collect Peter, Peter is having his own vision. Of a sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals. Peter is instructed “kill and eat.” Horrified at the thought of eating unclean foods, Peter, as we have come to expect, protests. But three times he hears the voice; then the sheet is taken back up to heaven.

As Peter is puzzling over this odd turn of events, the men sent by Cornelius knock on his door. The Spirit instructs Peter to admit them and do what they ask, and so he does. The next day they all journey back to Caesarea where Cornelius and his friends and family are waiting. As Peter tells this room full of Gentiles the story of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends, they begin speaking in tongues, and Peter baptizes the whole household.

What we read in Chapter 11 is Peter’s retelling of this tale to the Jewish Christians back home who are appalled, just as Peter had been appalled, by the suggestion that Gentiles, outsiders, could receive God’s salvation. But he relates everything that happened and their criticism turns to silence and then to praise and the story has a happy ending.

Given the privilege of hindsight, given that we are the Gentiles, given that God-loves-you-no-exceptions is a familiar tagline in the Episcopal church, it doesn't sound like anything to get excited about. But to Peter and to those first Jewish believers, this was something new. Their age-old assumptions about who belonged to God were suddenly turned inside out. Those clear boundaries separating clean and unclean, sacred and profane, weren't so clear after all. Peter came away from that experience with a new way of looking at the world.

The happy ending of this story doesn't last long. By Chapter 12 Herod is up to his old tricks and has Peter thrown into prison. And it's not just the villains who spoil things. For most of our history we Christians have been re-drawing the lines between who's in and who's out, between who's beliefs are correct and whose are not. For one group fundamentalists might be the problem; for another, it's woke liberals. For yet another it could be terrorists or immigrants or environmentalists, rich people or poor people or Muslims or atheists or God knows what else. Our hearts harden, our beliefs solidify, and we reduce God to a tidy formula and we are on the verge of destroying everything that is beautiful and true and holy.

"But up there," wrote Rusty Schweickart, "you go around (the earth) every hour and a half, time after time after time. You wake up (and as) you eat breakfast you look out the window and there's the Mediterranean . . . Greece and Rome and North Africa and the Sinai . . . And you realize in one glance what you're seeing is what was the whole history of humankind. And you go out over the Indian Ocean . . . then Burma, Southeast Asia, out over the Philippines. . . And finally you come up across the coast of California, . . . Los Angeles and Phoenix. . . And there's Houston, there's home, you know, and you look out, and you identify with it . . . And you do it again.

And it all becomes friendly to you. . . . And the next thing you recognize in yourself is that what you're identifying with begins to shift—you begin to recognize that your identity is with the whole thing. . . . You look down there and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross, again and again and again, and you don't even see them. There you are—hundreds of

people in the Middle East killing each other over some imaginary line that you're not even aware of, that you can't see. And from where you see it . . . the earth is a whole, and it's so beautiful. You wish you could take a person in each hand, one from each side, and say, 'Look. Look at it from this perspective. Look at that. What's important?'"

I can't say how Peter's experience in year one and Rusty Schweickart's experience in 1963 were alike or different. But at the very least both of these stories suggest that the distinctions which are so important to us, that define us, that we cling to and fight over, don't matter nearly as much as we thought. "I know now that God shows no partiality," Peter says to a crowd gathered in a home which the day before he would not have been willing to enter. "It all becomes friendly to you," reflects the Air Force pilot trained to fly fighters. It is not, I think, going too far to say that both Peter and Rusty Schweickart glimpsed something of the heart of God; they were able to see as God sees. And their eyes softened; their hearts opened, and nothing was the same.

The older I get the less I know for sure what God is. God is too complex, too transcendent, too immanent, too challenging, too glorious for my limited mind to grasp. But I know God is bigger than our political borders or religious creeds, bigger than differences of race, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, or anything else we can think up. And I believe all that is is part of God's life—from the Blue Marble and the galaxies beyond, to the animals in Peter's dream, to the air we breathe and the grass beneath our feet, to children not yet born, and right on down to you and me. What that means is, like it or not, we are all in this together. As "riders on the Earth together," to borrow Archibald MacLeish's phrase, we must share this precious home with those we love and with those we don't. My prayer is that somehow, please God, we open our hearts to receive the grace, wisdom, and courage to do so with joy and wonder. Amen.