

Even the Gentiles...

Meditation on Acts 11:1-18

April 24, 2016

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God!! So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

I have enjoyed my "winter" and now "spring" in Florida, especially being able to get out of the house every day and go for a walk. When I was walking this week with my son, Jacob, looking at my surroundings and enjoying the sunshine, I wondered, what are the creatures that I don't see? Of course, at each step, the sidewalk and the flowerbeds seem to come alive with those lizard-like creatures, scampering about. What are they? Didn't have those in Minnesota! But here for 6 months, I

barely see them anymore. And, then suddenly, Jacob and I turn a corner, and there is a swish right next to us. Swoosh! We stop and stare after the retreating creature. “It’s a snake,” Jacob said. “It’s a snake!” I said. Then we start walking again. More quickly this time, just in case the snake might change its mind and come back.

“He was big,” Jacob said, gesturing with his arms.

“He was big,” I agreed, motioning with my arms, a little wider. Kinda like the fish that got away. Here’s the tree where we saw the snake that almost bit us.

As I walk with Jacob, I also recall what I saw on my drive home from the church the day before. A whole family of cranes--on Wickham Road in Melbourne. Momma, Poppa, and 2 baby birds. At rush hour! And no one seemed to notice them, at least they weren’t slowing down, except to stop at the traffic light. Those birds were in real danger! I pulled over and parked. What could I do? As I watched the cranes, I thought about the Church. “Who else is in danger of being lost?” Who else needs God’s saving love? Are we reaching out enough with the love of Christ or are we keeping it for ourselves? How, I ask myself, as I often do, can we be more welcoming to all who come through our doors? And how can we take the message of the gospel to the world? For the same Spirit that brought salvation to us is meant to be shared with ALL.

This was the conclusion of the Early Church in Acts chapter 11. Peter and the apostles had been led by the Spirit to reach out to *even the Gentiles*. The definition of a Gentile, in the Jewish faith, is anyone who is not Jewish. The word “Gentile” is actually not a nice word to say; it’s an

insult. It doesn't just mean "not Jewish;" it meant people who are unclean (which is a nice way of saying dirty) and profane (offensive to God and religious people). So, some *Gentiles* had come to Peter, a Jewish apostle of Jesus, wanting him to come with them to a Gentile home to preach and baptize a Gentile household that wanted to receive the same Spirit the apostles had received. And Peter went to the Gentile household because he had received a vision of animals--some prohibited by Jewish law and others permitted. This vision taught him not only was it OK to eat the food of the Gentiles, but that God wanted the Church to grow. The gift of salvation is to be offered to ALL!

Up to then, only Jewish believers had been permitted in this new faith community that worshiped, fellowshiped, and ate together. But the dietary restrictions were only one thing that separated Jews and Gentiles. Prejudice was just as powerful a barrier. Jewish people were forbidden from accepting a Gentile's hospitality, even if the Gentile offered foods permitted by Jewish law. If a Jewish person even entered a Gentile building or handled articles belonging to a Gentile, they would be declared ceremonially "unclean" and could be barred from the synagogue.

In Peter's vision, God says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter protests. "By no means, Lord," he says in 11:8, "for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth!" Then he hears the voice again, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Just to make sure that Peter is listening, this happens 3 times, before the blanket with all of the animals is taken up into heaven.

Meanwhile, God has given a vision to a Gentile. Cornelius the

Centurion's vision is described in Acts 10. An angel of the Lord appears and tells him his prayers are answered and that he should dispatch men to go and bring back Simon (Peter) to Cornelius' house. Cornelius lived in the Gentile city of Caesarea, an ancient port on the Mediterranean coast. Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judea since 6 C.E. and the place where Paul would be imprisoned before being sent to Rome for trial. Cornelius was in charge of the Italian cohort of the Roman army --about 1,000 men. And Acts 10:2 says he was a "religious man." He and his household were "Godfearers"-- worshipers of the God of Israel. What's more, they demonstrated their faith by performing acts of charity *to the Jewish people* and praying to God "regularly." It's questionable whether they were permitted into the synagogues, but they may have been. What stood in the way of their conversion was not diet or prejudice. It was circumcision--the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. They had not been circumcised. In Gen. 17:13-14, God says to Abraham, "Your flesh will embody my covenant as an enduring covenant. Any uncircumcised male ...will be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant."

Knowing the background, let's go back to the first 2 verses of Acts 11. "Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God!! So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"

Now you understand why Peter is really in a pickle. Jerusalem is kind of the headquarters for Christianity at the time and believers all over Judea had been talking about what had happened with Peter and the

Gentiles before he arrived and had a chance to explain.

Peter's defense is that it wasn't his idea. This was all God's idea, revealed to Peter in a vision. Peter is just being obedient to God's commands. He and the Centurion were led by the Spirit to do this incredible thing--to offer God's salvation in Jesus Christ to people that Peter and other Jews had called "unclean" and "profane." And they didn't just baptize and say, "Good luck with the Christianity thing!" They welcomed them as brothers and sisters in the Church, united in Christ, without requiring them to be circumcised first.

As Paul would say in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And again in Colossians in 3:11: "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

Peter closes his argument by asking the Jewish followers of Christ, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

The Jewish believers, moved by the Spirit's work, respond with stunned silence, then by praising God. "This God," they say, "has given *even to the Gentiles* the repentance that leads to life."

Friends, when I got home from the funeral and reception at our church last night, I felt the Lord had answered my question of how we can be more welcoming to those who don't know Jesus and how we can reach out to the world. I was reminded how our funerals and the gatherings that follow are a powerful outreach, uniting people from a

variety of denominations and religious traditions, touching the hearts of some people who haven't been to church in years. Pete's childog reception in the fellowship hall was packed! And I am so proud of my church--and grateful to the many people who worked so hard to share the love of Christ through acts of kindness, big and small.

How we will be more welcoming? How we will take the gospel to the world, brothers and sisters? The Spirit will lead us.

And God will use us, as long as we know the same Spirit that brought salvation to us is meant to be shared with ALL.

Let us pray.

Holy One, Thank you for your Word and Spirit that brought salvation to the Jews and even to the Gentiles--and to this flock. May your Spirit continue to guide, transform and empower us today. Thank you for the many saints who ministered to the family and friends of Pete McCalman yesterday. Bless them, Lord, for their kindness and generosity. Bless the friendships that were renewed. We pray, Lord, that you will bring peace and comfort to those mourning the loss of loved ones. And we ask that you would reveal to us more opportunities to share the same Spirit that brought salvation to our flock to our community and world. In Christ we pray. Amen.