

“Guess Who is Coming to Dinner?”

19 May 2019: 5th Sunday of Easter—Confirmation/Senior Sunday

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Acts 11:1-18

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“Prejudice is opinion without judgement” (—Voltaire 1694 - 1778).

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Today is both Senior and Confirmation Sunday. Thus, as tricky as it is to link these sets, I want to speak to you folks about not necessarily going along with the crowd. I want you to go along with Jesus—and it is often difficult. One of my finest mentors was Jay Darnell who used to say something as funny as it was wise: “Sometimes you just have to set aside your principles and do the right thing.”

Sometimes we ask: “what does redemption mean?” Jesus’ resurrection asks us to do things that go against our inclinations. In our text, Peter is in a real fix. His people led him to the party line. Yet, the Holy Spirit nudged him in another direction. What do we do when life catches us between rival voices? What if our friends encourage us to do one thing, but our conscience something different? Hear the day’s lesson:

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 “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. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

8 But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 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. 13 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; 14 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” (Acts 11:1-18).

This story was so important to the early church that Acts relates it in both chapters 10 and 11, as Peter attested in Jerusalem before harsh critics. No issue was more debated, nor important to early Christians, than whether or not God intended their brand-new faith only for Jews or whether it might include Gentiles while remaining Gentiles. The circumcised believers bluntly ask Peter: “Why did you go to the uncircumcised (Gentiles) and eat with them” (Acts 11:3)? What most disturbed the Jewish religious

authorities was table fellowship with Gentiles—entering their homes, breaking bread at their tables (*Feasting on the Word—Year C, Volume 2*). Not baptism, not doctrine, not sexuality, not anything except—how dare you eat with a Gentile?

We can scarcely exaggerate Peter’s claim: “the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us.” This statement is a great equalizer between Gentiles and Jews and indeed all people and makes our world a vastly different place. Many of “the circumcision party” are shocked that Peter has “gone in with people who were uncircumcised, the Gentiles—and eaten with them.” They are not our kind!

For Jews eating was decisive. Who one ate with or not was a sign of who was in the in-group/cliq and who was not. Are these people part of us; or can we dismiss them as inconsequential? To Peter’s credit, as part of divine redemption, Peter says that he could not withstand God. God told him “nothing or no one” is unclean. Peter declares this clearly to the circumcision/Jewish Christian party: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Let’s show this concept of God’s redemption.

First, we imagine how we might view our own redemption with a story.

Ruth Graham, wife of the late Billy Graham, decided what she wants on her tombstone. It’s not what you would expect at all, but an unusual statement. She saw it one day on a road sign when driving down a North Carolina highway. She and Billy had gone through several miles of road construction, had to slow down, single lanes of traffic bogged them down, and they had to make detours here and there. At last they came to the end of the construction—and there Ruth saw a sign that caught her attention.

Pointing to it, she said, “Look! That’s what I want on my tombstone!” At first, he didn’t get it, but when it began to dawn on him, Graham smiled. The sign read: END OF CONSTRUCTION. THANKS FOR YOUR PATIENCE (Jim Moore, *When All Else Fails, Read the Instructions*, pp. 76-7).

God works with what God has in order to continue to lead us toward the perfection for which God created us. In a nutshell, God continues to do God’s creative work in us to help us accept God’s other creatures.

A second and concrete way to make clear our redemption occurs when we explore God’s redemption. As we look, we may also help enlarge and widen the hope of God’s redemption to others who think they are in hopeless situations. This is, of course, what our offerings do through the ministries of Jesus’ church. But we as folks and communities also try to make evident our own confidence in the hope of God. We may not always agree on what it means to follow Jesus, but we cannot question the central belief that we are here to follow Jesus. This attitude to help others is an acid test of what we really believe and in whom we ultimately trust.

I close with Ernest Campbell’s story of risky redemption. It’s safe to tell now—over 56 years later. Days after president John F. Kennedy’s Dallas assassination in 1963, a member of Campbell’s Ann Arbor, MI church called. She suggested that one thing the church might do to partially redeem the tragedy would be to provide Marina Oswald an opportunity learn English. Mrs. Oswald had expressed a desire to stay in the United States and learn its language better. Because it would have been politically foolish to bring this mission idea before the entire congregation, a few who represented the church’s executive committee got in touch with Marina Oswald in Dallas.

In due time and in cooperation with the FBI and others, Marina Oswald came to Ann Arbor. She slipped into town at night by train while a battery of reporters was waiting militantly at the airport. She lived with an unpretentious family that takes seriously its devotion to God and its love for people. When pressed to finally do so, the church joined the University of Michigan in issuing a modest press release.

Then the mail began to come in. Some were quick and hot to say that what the church did was unpatriotic. Others commented that the action was unwise, others unfair. (One woman said that she had belonged to a church for forty years and what it had done for her in all that time she could write on the back of a postage stamp.) Campbell answered every letter, rightly or wrongly, feeling it the obligation of his ministry to do so. He wrote in effect to each person who criticized, "The one thing you haven't shown us is that what we have done is unlike Christ" (Campbell, in *A Chorus of Witnesses*, ed. by Long, Eerdmans, 1994, p. 169).

Although it goes against ever instinct you have, remember that it was your own Savior and Messiah who said: "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return . . . for . . . the Most High . . . is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:35). If you desire to follow Jesus, then you may have to "set aside your principles and do the right thing."

To our confirmation and graduating senior friends I say: You are also part of the great and glorious list of those who have faith in Christ. You are now on your way to becoming part of the "roll called up yonder." Perhaps we can fittingly end our service this morning by reminding you of what might have been in our Bible if you would have been born a few thousand years earlier.

Jesus called his disciples and chose, whom he also named . . . Hunter Haas 9:00, Conner Cook 11:15 (2019 Seniors), Lauren Brooke Allison, Isabella Riley Dudeczka, Millye Grace Edwards, Sean Nicholas Murray, Jacob William Preston, Madeline Avery Rakowitz, Ayden Luther Rose, Mason Luke Whitley, Lillian Faith Voelter (9:00 a.m. Worship); Kannon Lee Baird, Juliet Avianna Glenn, Brodie Case Landon, Sydney Grace Lange, and Hayden John McGarry (11:15 a.m. Worship) . . . Amen.

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