

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year C)

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*Acts 11:1-18*

*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.'*

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"You ate with *them*?"

Peter paused before answering the question. He knew that what he had done was unconventional at best and straight up heretical at worst. He had been raised a good Jew, knowing the difference between that which was "clean" and that which was "unclean." Growing up, he had followed the strict dietary laws of the Pentateuch, laws that were intended to identify the Jews as God's chosen people. The following of these laws was not trivial; it was a practice that brought meaning and identity to a people who had entered into a covenant with a loving God.

Peter was also circumcised. It was the mark of a Jewish male that symbolized the covenant established between God and "Father Abraham" and his descendants. It was an important thing, circumcision. Done on the eighth day after birth, a Jewish male was circumcised to represent his entrance into the Jewish faith.

The Jews' obedience to dietary laws and the following of the practice of circumcision were two of the most important ways in which the Jews identified themselves as a "holy" people. Simply put, these were the ways the Jews ordered their worldview.

Peter was a product of that worldview but something had happened to him a few weeks prior that brought that worldview into question.

Peter had been taking a nice nap one afternoon when a vision came to him in the form of a dream. He saw something like a sheet being lowered from heaven, and upon that sheet were animals of many kinds, both “clean” and “unclean” by Jewish standards.

“Get up, Peter, and eat” said a big booming voice from the sky.

But Peter, being the good Jew that he was, knew the “correct” answer to that question. “By no means, Lord,” he responded, “for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”

But then the big booming voice from the sky responded, “What God has called clean, you must not call profane.”

This exchange then repeated twice for a total of three times - a classic device in the biblical narrative to emphasize the divine importance of the message.

As soon as he wakes up, Peter gets visited by three strangers who take him to another person’s house, the person of which we are to presume is gentile (along with the rest of the family).

Normally, it would be blasphemous for Peter to hang out with such a crowd. He, being a Jew, would not be allowed to break bread with Gentiles. He was circumcised, they weren’t. He followed certain dietary restrictions, they didn’t.

But the dream that Peter had changed all that. He realized that the Spirit that led him to have that divine dream was the same Spirit that was calling him to minister to and with “these people,” these Gentiles. And so he did. Peter allowed himself to be changed by the dream and ministered to the Gentiles in that area, setting a precedent for the Gospel that others were certain to find threatening.

And the word spread. Pretty soon, everyone was talking about how Peter, this leader of this new Christian movement, was dining with and preaching to *Gentiles*. Sooner or later, Peter was going to have to explain himself.

And so, the other apostles and believers bring Peter up for questioning.

“You ate with *them*?” they asked.

Peter replied by telling the story that is recalled in today’s passage from the Book of Acts. Peter doesn’t reply with a simple “yes” or “no.” Peter doesn’t reply with a detailed theological treatise or mission statement. Peter replies by giving his testimony of the experience he had. He told them of the dream he had with the sheet and the clean and unclean animals. And then he told them of the gospel experience he had with people - Gentiles - that he wouldn’t have had the wisdom to minister to had he not been the recipient of that dream.

We mentioned last week that the Book of Acts is a story of the growing concentric circles of the Gospel spreading. What began with a few women at an empty tomb is now becoming an unstoppable movement, led by none other than our good friend Peter. Their numbers are growing and, with their growth, are coming certain questions that they didn’t have to worry about before. Now, the question of inclusivity is becoming an issue. Frankly put, the Christians are beginning to ask, “who is in and who is out?” Such is not really an important question when you are only 12 followers and a Messiah. But now that the movement is growing into the numbers of the thousands, the ten thousands, and hundreds of thousands, the growing Church is having to define itself.

Today, you and I are still part of a church that is struggling with this very issue. The most recent example of this is the issue of whether or not we, as a denomination, would recognize same-sex marriage. Just a month before I was ordained as your pastor, ministers in the Presbyterian Church could be brought up on ecclesiastical charges for presiding at the marriage of a same-sex couple. However, in June of 2014 (not even two years ago!), after literally decades of debate and prayer, the PCUSA decided to officially recognize same-sex marriage.

There were (and are still) faithful disciples on both sides of that issue. Like many people who, in Peter's time, thought that circumcision and dietary laws were necessary to follow the Christian movement, there are many Presbyterians who believed that same sex marriage was explicitly forbidden in the biblical context. However, after many long decades, a growing number of Presbyterians came to understand that the Holy Spirit moves in mysterious ways. Stories were told about the faithful deeds of our homosexual sisters and brothers in Christ, about how the Gospel was being proclaimed in and through them. Testimonies, like Peter's in today's story from the Book of Acts, were given and minds were changed.

And now, because of the movement of the Holy Spirit, the Church looks different. That's what happens when the Spirit moves; the Church begins to look different. The Church - thanks to dreams like Peter's - welcomes different voices and explores different ways to proclaim the same Gospel of Christ.

It is important to understand that Peter's inclusion of the Gentiles (as well as the PCUSA's long overdue inclusion of homosexuals) was not without precedent. Just a quick look at Jesus' ministry shows that he made a career out of challenging the status quo regarding who he hung out with.

Jesus, too was a circumcised Jew. He, too, knew the laws and followed the heart of such laws. However, Jesus saw something beautiful, something worth redeeming, in people that society had already decided to shun. Jesus, in being perfectly human and perfectly God, saw the holiness in people of *all* kinds. We are, likewise, called to see the holiness in all people, especially the people who might make us a little uncomfortable. Especially the people that, God forbid, might be a little different than us.

I hope that we all dream tonight. I hope that we dream tonight of a sheet being lowered down from heaven with a variety of people on it. Or, perhaps, instead of a sheet, imagine that an island is being lowered down. On this island are people of all different kinds. White people, hispanic people, black people, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist, gay, straight, sober, addicted, wealthy, poor, middle-class, young, old, summer residents, second homeowners, snowbirds, hareleggers, people you like, people you don't like, people who you would gladly invite to your home and people you would rather not. I hope that we dream about all of these people and I hope that dream challenges us to realize that God does not call a single person profane. Rather, God calls each and every one of them, each and every one of us, "beloved."

When Peter was asked, "you ate with *them*?" I imagine that he was probably a little surprised himself at his answer. I imagine that Peter was still trying to grasp the way the Holy Spirit was working. I imagine that Peter had been on quite a wild ride so far and, perhaps, he was finally learning to expect the unexpected. Dreams do that to us. They expand the boundaries of what you and I call "normal" or "expected." So, too, does the Holy Spirit guide us to broaden our expectations of who is "in the club." And, if truth be told, none of us, not one of us, deserves to be "in the club" of God's love. We are each loved by God regardless of our brokenness.

So who are we to hinder God's love?