

“A very heavy sheet”

- I would just like the record to show that I resisted the temptation to open this sermon by saying, “Bacon wrapped shrimp.”
 - I remember hearing sermons about this passage growing up
 - And it was not uncommon for the whole purpose of this passage in Acts to be about liberating us from Jewish cleanliness code
 - Thus the bacon wrapped shrimp, forbidden to our Jewish forebears
 - But permitted by us Gentile Christians!
 - Most of the time it would be presented as how luck you and I are that we don’t have to obey those antiquated cleanliness rules
 - Our opening lesson from Acts is Peter’ recounting of this amazing, and liberating experience he had before eating and talking with Gentiles
 - This morning I want us to start here, at this most superficial level of what we can eat, and hear this amazing event in Peter’s life
 - And then I want us to go a little deeper into what I think this passage is telling you and me today, in 2019 America
 - I want us to hear a much a harder lesson of love than simply what we choose to eat
- Our lesson from Acts is Peter’s own retelling of the event that happened to him just a chapter before
 - He has moved on to Jerusalem, and is being criticized by other Christians for what just happened
 - He retells the story as a way of helping them understand that God is doing a new thing
 - Peter recounts to them how before meeting Cornilius and his servants, he was on the rooftop praying
 - He became hungry, and while the meal was being prepared, he had a huge moment of contact with the divine
 - Life altering, tectonic shift in understanding, which by the way God is very good at
 - God takes the fact that Peter is hungry, meets him where he is, and begins to show him a new way

- The sheet comes down from heaven, loaded with all kinds of animals that are both clean and unclean
 - Four-footed creatures, reptiles, birds, and even birds of prey
- But perhaps more significantly, God tells Peter to kill and eat without preparing the food in kosher ways¹
- Still the point is the same, three times God tells Peter to do what a good and observant Jewish man would never do
- Because it would make him unclean, it would violate his religious beliefs, of what he thought was right and wrong
- Three times that sheet was lowered, three times God says what I have made clean you should not call profane
- And three times that sheet was raised back up again, taking it all back to heaven
- How heavy that sheet must have been...
- It held not only a bunch of animals, but Peter's world view, his assumptions, his piety
- It was full of things that can, if left unchecked, become more important than the people who stand in front of us.
- Immediately after, events that God had set in motion come to fruition and servants of a Roman soldier show up at Peter's house
- They ask Peter to come with them, that God told their master to seek Peter out
- And Peter goes, he preaches, and he stays with them, eats with them
- And of course God works amazing things through these Gentiles
- Now he is at Jerusalem defending his actions to other Jewish Christians
- So we can of course begin our excavation of this huge moment in the early church's life, and especially in Peter's, with the food
 - It is true- this is likely part of the reason why the Christian church dispensed with the Jewish dietary laws as time went by
 - God made it clear that Gentiles, just as they were, uncircumcised and eating unclean food, were still able to receive the Spirit
 - This had to be a major upset- indeed the thought of it caused the first argument within the ancient Christian community
 - For the ancient Israelites, being a part of God's chosen people meant that you were not a Gentile

¹ New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, CDROM, Commentary on Acts 10:12

- Their identity was based in part of who they were not, just as much as who they were
- And a lot of these pious dietary laws were there to make them even more distinct than the surrounding cultures
- The same could even be said of male circumcision- it existed to help create a cultural identity, to be set apart.
- To keep the Jewish identity alive
- They had been conquered by the Babylonians, then the Assyrians came along, and now Rome.
- Their leaders scattered across the region-
- Holding on to these cultural differences kept their cultural identity alive in the face of all that adversity
- Peter, by letting go of some of that, lets go of some of who he is
- Sacrifices some of his own identity so God can open himself up to people around him
- So if God can dispense with the differences found here in culture and identity in an effort to connect with people who are different
- What else is God asking us to dispense with?
- What else is on that sheet that is keeping us from loving others?
- We can really get going on this one! And probably should.
 - For you and me in modern America, this list certainly includes race
 - Explicitly enslaving people of color for over a hundred years of our country's life
 - And still today, the effects of that injustice lingers, built right into the fabric of society that simply prefers and trusts light skin over dark.
 - We call it systemic racism.
 - Certainly, on the heavy sheet of what God is showing us, and calling us to let go, is racism.
 - We can also without much work realize that sex and gender are on that sheet too
 - Are among the things I think God is calling us to let go of, to no longer be a basis of prejudice and preformed judgment for others
 - Sexism has been around for a very long time, and while we certainly talk a lot about it today, it is still just as strong
 - Women are held to different standards, assumptions are made at what women can and cannot do well
 - How they should and should not act and speak
 - Much like the preference for lighter skin, large parts of our culture prefer men, and will give men advantages

- And so much of this is true for people of different sexual orientations as well
- We call this systemic sexism.
- I think our world favors and prefers educated, it prefers well spoken, and it prefers wealthy
- That is called classism.
- If you do not fall in those categories, you will most likely be judged quickly and less important and less valuable.
- Thought of as irresponsible or lazy- it's called systemic poverty
- There are so many criteria with which we unfairly judge other people- I have barely scratched the surface
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- Surely God is showing us these things on that heavy sheet, and hopefully lifting them from us and taking them away
- Allowing us to see people more clearly, more as God sees them
- Like Peter was able to see Cornelius, the Gentile... really see him.
- Even though he had been taught all his life that they were not worth it, did not deserve it.
- That cutting through all of those 'isms' comes love
- It is really all about love- that should come as no surprise to anyone here
- Our Gospel that goes so well with this text is a familiar one, from Maundy Thursday
- It's the "maundy" in Maundy Thursday, or the commandment in Commandment Thursday²
- Jesus tells his disciples that they have to love as he has loved.
- He is talking to them right after he said that one will betray him, and that Peter will deny him three times
- He still says have love for one another, even when they hurt you, and persecute you, you still have to wash feet.
- And that the world will know them by that love
- I think there might be even more on the sheet that is preventing us from loving in America, in the year 2019
- Here is what I see for us today, from both sides of almost every issue
 - It comes with the polarization of each and every issue, no matter how small, but that's not just it
 - It seems that pervasively when there is a disagreement, whether in politics, the church, or on moral issues

² <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter5c>

- The issue becomes so important, so full of rhetoric, that the sides begin to lose sight of each other
- That the issues starts to become a little more important than the people who are on the other side of it.
- I was watching a video recently online and it really hit the nail on the head
- It happened to be by Arthur Brooks, the President of American Enterprise Institute³
- I had never seen the guy before, don't know much about him really
- But this video was good. ⁴
- It was similar to a TED talk, and he was discussing the problem in politics
- He says, and I think he's on to something... the problem in today's politics (and dare I say society at large)
- Is that we have a **contempt problem**.
- Not just an anger problem, but a contempt problem.
- Contempt as defined by sociologists as, "the utter conviction of the worthlessness of another human being."
- He says that this is the real problem in politics, you can here it on social media, and in stump speeches
- And dare I say it is not contained to just there- even the church has its moments of contempt
- The answer to this contempt problem, he says and he quotes the Dalai Lama, is to be... warm hearted.
- That's what happened to Peter and the sheet from heaven
- It wasn't really about unclean food.
- It started with the racial and religious divides of Peter's day, slowly unraveling them to spread the good news of Jesus Christ
- But the real lesson for us today is how Peter not only went to the Gentiles at Cornelius's house
- But how he returned to Jerusalem and encountered the other Christians, and argued.
- How they heard this story, had disagreements and debates, but how they somehow stopped short of contempt for each other
- Perhaps they remembered, so fresh in their minds, about what Jesus told them
- About his example of love that endured even the cross.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_C._Brooks

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10154251688431403>

- For Peter, each time that sheet came down and went back up to heaven, I believe on it was more than random animals that Peter could eat
- Each time God relieved Peter of a little of his prejudice, a little of his self-righteousness in being God's chosen people
- Each time little bit of contempt's replaced with a little bit of warm heartedness
- Preparing him not only for Cornelius, but for the other Christians in Jerusalem.
- So what is on our sheets?
 - What is God asking us to encounter and to release?
 - What is preventing us from loving, from being warm-hearted even with those who we greatly disagree?
 - I want to tell myself this each and every time I am tempted to comment back on social media to some ignorant post.
 - The way of Jesus is not just about being right about an issue...
 - It **is** about that, just ask Peter
 - And it's about being warm-hearted even to those who disagree with us, hate us, and irritate us.
 - Pursuit of the Truth (big T), as well as the way in which we do it.
 - Speak truth, Seek justice. And do so while digging deep to find the warm heart of love that seeks to serve.
 - And enjoy the shrimp.

Amen.