

5-18-25 Sermon: “When God Has Made Clean” – Acts 11:1-18

Every year in the Easter season, the lectionary offers us a few readings from Book of Acts.

We don’t read from Acts very often in worship, which is a shame because it our origin story. It’s the story of how the church came to be, how the disciples continued their ministry after Jesus ascended into heaven. The story of how the Holy Spirit showed up and *shook up* the church – and how she continues to shape the church today.

We don’t know these stories very well. And when we don’t know our stories, we tend to lose our way. So let’s take a minute to walk through and unpack this story.

Our main characters are Peter – y’all know him – and a Roman man named Cornelius.

Cornelius is a centurion – a commander in the Roman army. He is a Gentile, not a Jew, but he worships the God of Israel. He is what was called a “God-fearer” – a Gentile who is attracted to the Jewish religion but who doesn’t go all the way to conversion, which would mean observing the Jewish law and...circumcision.

God comes to Cornelius in a vision and tells him to send for Peter and bring him to his house. So Cornelius sends his servants to Joppa, where Peter is staying.

Meanwhile, Peter is praying, and he falls asleep (been there, done that) – and the Holy Spirit comes to *him* in a very strange dream. He sees a large sheet descending from heaven, and all the animals on earth are standing on it. And the Holy Spirit says to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.”

And Peter says, “Aha! It’s a test!” He knows many of these animals are not kosher; the Torah prohibits Jews from eating these animals – like pigs, and shellfish. And Peter says, “No, Lord, you know I’d never eat something unclean!”

But instead of an A+ and a pat on the back, what Peter gets is a rebuke; the Spirit says, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Peter wakes up and is still trying to make sense of this acid trip of a dream, when Cornelius’ servants arrive. And the Spirit speaks to Peter again and says, “Go with them, and make no distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them.’”

So Peter goes. He stays at Cornelius’ house, eats at his table, preaches the gospel to his whole household. And one day, while Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit comes and descends upon these Gentile God-fearers; they prophesy and speak in tongues, just like Jews did at Pentecost.

And Peter says, “Oh my gosh! That vision I received wasn’t just about food and animals...it was about people! In Christ, there *is* no “clean nor unclean.” No Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus and equal in God’s sight! And Peter *baptizes* those Gentiles! He breaks all the rules in order to follow where the Holy Spirit leads.

In this morning’s reading, the Jewish believers confront Peter because they’ve heard that he has been staying and eating...with Gentiles. It’s funny; they’re worried that he’s shared meals with Gentiles...wait ‘til they hear that he *baptized* them!

But amazingly, when Peter tells this story – about his vision, and how the Holy Spirit came to these Gentiles – his fellow Jewish Christians are convinced! With Peter they confess, “Who are we to hinder God? God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to new life.”

No more clean versus unclean. No more us versus them. The Holy Spirit makes it clear to the early church: You who follow Jesus may not exclude...anyone! There shall be no more 'in' or 'out' among you, for in Christ, you are all 'in.'

And friends, as we all know, the Church has *enthusiastically* followed these instructions all through the course of history...right?

What's that you say? That's now how the story goes?

Well yeah, I guess there's Catholics vs. Orthodox, and Protestants vs. Catholics. And then the different Protestant denominations... ok. We do kind of have a history of kicking people out or killing them for believing the wrong things. And yeah, now that you mention it, we have excluded people because of their *race*. And we've limited what people can do in church because of their *gender*. And we Presbyterians did take 40ish years to finally follow the Spirit on LGBTQIA+ inclusion... Yeah, so turns out we're really bad at this!

Churches are experts at division and exclusion, aren't they? In fact, one could – perhaps pessimistically, but accurately – characterize the whole history of the Church through the last 2000+ years as a history of fracturing and division over who is 'in' and who is 'out.'

Friends, how have we missed the mark on this so badly? In Acts 10 and 11, God declares in no uncertain terms that we cannot call "profane" or "unclean" those things and people that God has called "beloved." And yet, how many years have we spent doing exactly that?

Surely there are some nefarious reasons for our division and exclusion. We draw lines between 'us' and 'them' out of selfishness and self-righteousness; we build walls out of fear. And we know the power of original sin; we've been raised in systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, where we've internalized these anti-Christian values without even realizing it. We've bought unknowingly into worldviews that life up 'us' and demonize 'them.'

But I don't think it's just that we're *bad*. Sure, sometimes we are, but I think there's something deeper going on here, something that starts out well-intentioned before it gets distorted into division and exclusion.

Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians didn't maintain their dietary restrictions because they got a kick out of being the "kosher police." The Jews in the first century were an occupied people, living under the will and whimsy of the Roman Emperor. And they'd been an occupied people for centuries: first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greek, the Romans. And many of these empires had tried to wipe them out, to break them up, to destroy their unique identity and turn the Jews into good, conforming Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. And when your land, your sovereignty, your rights have been taken away, all you have left to keep you from fading into oblivion are those more subtle identity markers – for Jews, Torah observance and circumcision.

And the restriction on eating with Gentiles – the Jews weren't trying to be contrary or exclusive. They had a *religious* issue: Most of the meat sold in the markets had been sacrificed in honor of the Roman Emperor. Jews did not eat this meat because the Torah prohibits eating meat sacrificed to idols (And make no mistake: A head of state considering themselves divine is an idol). Jewish households made sure to procure kosher meat, but if you ate with Gentiles, you may unknowingly be eating this sacrificed meat and thus committing blasphemy.

The Jews were not trying to be exclusive, not initially. They were trying to preserve their identity. To claim their relationship with God, the uniqueness of who they are. The privilege in their experience of God's grace.

But the Holy Spirit comes to Peter and says, "It's time to make a change."

God's grace, she says, is not a finite entity. It's not a pie, where if I get more, you get less. You living your identity does not keep me from living my identity. There's room in God's love for both of us, and in fact, by the power of God's grace, our unique differences can be the places where we connect. Like a jigsaw puzzle, where the pieces fit together precisely because their shapes are different.

Peter and the early Christians bend to the power of God's grace. They repent. They change. They submit to the authority of grace; they believe the words of the Holy Spirit: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Oh that our world, too, might learn this lesson. Amen.