

Easter 5 - Acts 10:45 - 11:1-18 (Breaking Boundaries)

Luke's Gospel unfolds as a theology of the church, as told through the Jesus traditions, and continues to develop through Luke-Acts. Luke was writing during a time when the church was facing some of its greatest crises of identity, as it tried to come to terms with what it meant to be the people of God in the world. The church was inaugurated and commissioned in Jerusalem by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As the followers of Jesus fled to Judea and Samaria to avoid persecution, they proclaimed the Gospel wherever they went. The result was the Samaritan Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit was at work, even among the "unclean" or "impure" Samaritans just as it was among the Jews in Jerusalem.

Much of today's story repeats what has already occurred as Peter recounts the visions he received and the events in Cornelius' home emphasizing the boundary-breaking character of God's redemptive work. The Holy Spirit was leading Peter at every step as he witnessed the unfolding of the purposes of God for the emerging church. Peter willingly and perhaps eagerly accepted the Gentile converts into the fellowship of followers of Jesus, who in turn responded by inviting Peter to spend some time with them.

Cornelius' household believed the good news, received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. Peter and the Israelite believers stayed with Cornelius and his family for several days. That Gentiles would be gifted with the Holy spirit, and be granted a place in God's new age, was an astonishing development for the Israelite believers! But even more unfathomable was the notion that Israelites would share the table with Gentiles.

As the news of Gentiles accepting the word of God reached the believers in Judea, it should have brought both wonderment and celebration rather than criticism. But Peter responded: "And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?"

Peter's acceptance and interaction with the Gentiles caused a crisis. Luke uses this incident to recount the great struggle of identity and mission that is emerging in the fledgling community, soon to be called Christians. This is the most crucial crisis faced by post-resurrection community. Its resolution would forever define the nature of the Christian community and the church.

Peter was challenged by some Jewish Christians for eating with Gentiles, a direct accusation that he is not observing the Leviticus dietary laws. For the second time, Peter tells the story of his vision that had led him to the house of Cornelius.

But there is more at stake here than legal issues or obedience. The dietary regulations were a matter of religious and communal identity that had been hammered out on the anvil of history. When the Greeks took control of Palestine, the Jews were forced to adopt Greek culture; to conform to Greek laws, customs, and religion. Many Jews complied, weakening the identity of Judaism.

Recalling their struggles after returning from Babylonian exile and the danger of losing their

religious heritage and identity, the strict enforcement of religious and cultural laws, all 613 of them, was a means of defining the Israelites as God's people, and setting them apart from the pagan world in which they existed.

So, the observance of the dietary laws was a matter of religious identity, a symbol of who Jews were as people of God. This is the background Peter faced when God told him to eat the "unclean" food. It contradicted everything he had been taught as important to his faith. He faced the total transformation of his understanding of his commitment to God. God was asking him to leave a place of security and identity, to launch out into uncharted waters with nothing more than the word of God in a vision to guide him. So, the heart of the issue for the early church was not about clean or unclean food. The real issue was about regulations that divide the world into insiders and outsiders based on conformity to certain rules and what it does to other people and community.

Concern with unclean food leads to seeing unclean people. That is the accusation brought against Peter. Even though his vision had been about what foods were clean and unclean, he was accused by the "insiders" of eating with the "outsiders." The insider Christians referred to the Gentile Cornelius and his household as "uncircumcised men," stressing the mentality that exists among them. They saw other people in terms of who were acceptable and who were not, based on external criteria such as what foods they ate.

Yet on another level, the "circumcised believers" had every right to challenge Peter. They had no way of confirming what God told Peter. From their perspective, Peter was simply irresponsibly abandoning the faith. The "insider" mentality had allowed the Jews to survive through situations in which failure to draw those lines so tightly, could have resulted in their disappearance into the eddies of history.

The important issue here is that as right and necessary as some things may have been in the past, time and history move on. Will, what was once a perfectly legitimate expression of the faith, always be so? A particular way of expressing and living the faith, or a familiar set of responses to the world in which we exist as God's people that was at one point appropriate and vital, may at another point become a hindrance and destroy the very reason we exist as God's people.

In his explanation to those who have confronted him with eating with the "outsider" Gentiles, Peter draws attention to the activity of God among the Gentiles. Peter himself struggles with the implications of what he was being told. Peter's protest, "By no means, Lord!" was not the protest of rebellion, but the protest of honest and sincere piety that did not want to let go of something that had shaped who he was as a devout Jew. It is the cry of one who understands what is at stake in moving from where he is, and does not want to abandon too easily what he sees as the anchor of his faith.

But the voice that called him was unmistakable: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." The threefold repetition of the vision assures Peter that it is genuine. But God did not leave Peter with only this vision with which to struggle. The conversion of Cornelius and his household and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles was the final confirmation for Peter that

this was truly from God. This silenced Peter's critics who recognized that something new was at work in God's relationship with humanity.

The result was a unity of the believers, a unity forged around a radically different set of assumptions about the faith than that with which it began. The point of unity was the leadership of God in the lives of these people and this community, calling them to move beyond where they were to where they needed to be in order to be able to meet the demands of a changing world.

In contrast to the purity system with its sharp social boundaries, the emergent Christian movement substituted a radically alternate social vision. The new community that Jesus announced, would be characterized by interior compassion for everyone, not external compliance to a purity code; by radical inclusivity rather than by hierarchical exclusivity; and by inward transformation rather than by outward ritual. In place of "be holy, for I am holy" from Leviticus, Jesus deliberately substituted the call to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" as found in Luke's Gospel.

God, Peter learned, is not a God of partiality or favoritism. God welcomes every person from any nation. The good news that was sent to the people of Israel, was that the grace of God was clearly given "even to the Gentiles. If the God of all creation did not exclude Cornelius and the Gentiles as impure or unclean, Peter realized that neither could he.

The status quo cannot and will not contain the Gospel. The Gospel affirms that our ideas of correctness cannot limit its message. This is not a denial of the value of traditions by which God's people order their lives. But it clearly affirms that the Gospel does not exist for the sake of preserving tradition. It exists for the sake of calling people into relationship with God even if it must be *in spite* of tradition.

Too often, we approach our call from the perspective of "insiders." We see ourselves as the "chosen," sent into the world to help others see the error of their ways and conform to us. But if we carefully examine this passage, we will realize that we are not the "insiders!" **We are the "outsiders"** who have been accepted, and allowed in by the grace of God into God's new work in the world. We are the subversive element of the Gospel, the salt, the light, the leaven that will transform the world. We are called to bear witness to what God has done in Christ. Like Peter, we are called to tell the story of God's great act of reconciliation.

Like the early church, we are taking the Gospel into a different world than the one in which we live. We have to ask some hard questions about our traditions, especially those that have tended to make us "insiders." The hard questions come when we begin asking whether some of those things that have given us identity in the past, have now become barriers to carrying out our God-given mission.

We need to grapple with the questions as the early church did. Why should we keep to the standards or traditions that we have adopted, or that our community has adopted? It's not easy but it is important to ask these questions, because if we never struggle to ask the questions, we shall never have the answers. There are a variety of ways that these questions can play out in

specific church traditions, or in local communities. But the issue of “people” versus “traditions” or of “insiders” versus “outsiders” is an issue that exists in every religious community.

The other important issue or question is: What is God doing in the world? This passage is permeated with God’s action. It is God who gives Peter this vision of a new way. It is God who works with Cornelius and his family. And it is the gift of the Holy Spirit that ties the whole scenario together. It is **God’s** new work in the world, calling people to follow. The greatest task of the church is to find out where God is already working in the world, and then participate in that work as God gives directions. Perhaps we have too often missed the new work of God in the world because we were waiting for something to happen in our own corner of the world on our terms, when God was already doing great things over in Cornelius’ house!

Peter now recognizes that God’s promise has broader implications than might have been understood at first. It isn’t just repentant Israel, but even Gentiles like Cornelius who are God’s intended beneficiaries of Jesus’ resurrection and the recipients of the Spirit.

The church’s Spirit-led experience has brought us new insights regarding things like slavery, racial equality and justice, women’s rights and ordination, and LGBTQ dignity. Some of that becomes obvious in history’s rearview mirror. Still, encountering the Spirit who is alive and pushing the church in new and astonishing directions can be frightening. The Spirit always pushed the church into greater practice of God’s love for all people of the world. The church is always working toward a fuller understanding of what God is doing, and listening to hear from surprising sources what new things God is doing.

We are the recipients of the power of the great gift from God that can still change attitudes, perceptions and even lives. At its root, the good news is not a universalized theological truth to be believed, but an experience of God that draws us all together into a shared confession and glorification of God.

Let our rejoicing in the God who is the God of all be like the psalmist’s: wild animals and all livestock, small scurrying animals and birds, kings of the earth and all people, rulers and judges of the earth, young men and young women, old men and children. Let them all praise the name of the Lord, for his name is great; his glory towers over the earth and heaven! Amen.