

In the preview for this morning, I wish I had encouraged you to read the tenth chapter of Acts. Even though our lesson in Acts 11 is Peter’s summary of what happened in chapter 10, it is like hearing just one end of his phone conversation with a Gentile believer named Cornelius

With what I find to be either a divine sense of humor or dramatic creativity, God does a double vision thing in Acts 10. Cornelius, a Roman centurion who prayed to God, has a vision. An angel tells him to send three messengers to Joppa, find Simon Peter, and bring him back to Cornelius’ house in Caesarea.

The camera fades from Cornelius and reopens on Peter, who is staying at the seaside home of friends in Joppa, perhaps sipping ice tea and enjoying views of the Mediterranean Sea. It is noon, and while others prepare lunch, Peter goes up to the roof to pray. Peter falls into a trance and has a vision of a white sheet being lowered on which there was an all you can eat buffet – yet the all you can eat part did not have to do with how much one could eat, but the smorgasbord of food options, most notably what Peter knows are non-kosher foods.

In our Acts 11 lesson, Peter retells the vision and how he indeed went to the household of Cornelius, taught them, and then ate a meal with them – “them” meaning Gentiles, non-kosher folks. Having table fellowship with “those people” is what he has to justify when he returns to Jerusalem, where the believers are holding both the Scriptures and a Book of Order. Let’s listen for God’s word to us in 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. <sup>2</sup>So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup>saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” <sup>4</sup>Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,*

*<sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup>I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup>But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’*

*<sup>9</sup>But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ <sup>10</sup>This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.*

*<sup>11</sup>At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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; <sup>14</sup>he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ <sup>15</sup>And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup>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.’*

*<sup>17</sup>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?" <sup>18</sup>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."*

From time to time in my high school youth group, the pastor would have an "ask the pastor" session, which some approached as an opportunity to "stump the pastor." I attended a high school where roughly half the students were Jewish. I don't recall ever really being concerned about my friends' eternal destiny, but I raised my hand and asked, "Can Jewish people go to heaven?"

I expect most of you have asked and answered my question. Many will say, "Certainly," perhaps espousing a belief that all good people go to heaven. Others will either gently close or quickly slam shut heaven's door, believing only those who have declared Jesus as Lord and Savior are saved. Some will simply defer, saying, "I leave the question of anyone's eternal salvation to God."

A question with which the early church wrestled was the opposite of mine; they did not ask, "Can Jews go to heaven?" for the first were all Jewish, but they asked, "Can a non-Jew be part of the church?" Our Acts lesson reprises this first century controversy between Jewish-Christians based in Jerusalem and Judea – the "us" – and Gentile converts elsewhere – the "them" – and whether the "them" must conform to be like "us" in ritual and practice.

As this political season seems to affirm, humans have a tendency to divide for reasons of identity and security, with fear often being the source of division. This is not just heard in bold declarations to "divide and conquer," but it appears in our everyday conversations when we simply use the words, "us" and "them." Sometimes the division is along religious lines – Muslim, Mormon, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu. Other times we divide along racial or ethnic lines using colors – black, white, brown, yellow, red. Often we make economic distinctions – rich, middle class, working poor, welfare poor. In politics, everyone seeks to cater to the "us" of the middle class, even if they belong to the "us" of the wealthy class.

Divisions of "us" and "them" easily create stereotypes, allowing "us" to group all of the "thems" of a certain type together. This is particularly prevalent and easy if we don't know any "thems," or there are no "thems" in the same room. We say, "you know that's just the way 'those people' are." "Those people" may be a certain race or gender, economic class or nationality, religion or politics, sexual orientation or identity. In fact, if the conversation becomes slow between "us", we need only find a common "them" to decry, and inevitably the chatter will pick up. Now, let me add that while I have a problem with "us-them" distinctions, I am also well aware how easy it is for me to swallow the bait of "them" bashing when I am in a group of just "us."

The church has not been immune from contributing to “us-them” divisiveness. Jesus walked this earth 2,000 years ago. Over the ensuing centuries the church has placed barriers to membership and restrictions on leadership. Scripture and theology have been used to justify gender and racial biases that most today consider unjust and wrong. In our Presbyterian Church history, women were not ordained to be pastors until 1956; for two centuries, Presbyterians stood by Paul’s scriptural admonitions against women teaching or leading in the church as the truth we embraced. Separation by gender was the norm in the first century when Paul wrote, but these days I know of more theologically and socially conservative Presbyterian congregations that embrace the full inclusion of women, in spite of Scripture that says, “Women should be silent in church.”

We continue to struggle with issues of race and ethnicity, and the subtleties of class and racial privilege, but at least we are on record as setting aside racial prohibitions. We reject attempts to find in Scripture any justification for a supremacy of any race or culture as Nazi Germany sought to do, even using theologians in the effort.

Now, back to Peter’s enlightenment during his noontime prayers. As one raised in Jewish tradition, “every bit of his past had reinforced the distinction between clean and unclean.” [Preaching Through the Christian Year, (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994) p. 250.] Peter knew the food, purity and holiness codes of the Jewish law. That is why the vision is so vividly frightening to him, particularly when repeated three times. (It seems Peter always had to have things said three times.) “Peter, kill and eat food that you have been taught was forbidden.” “Peter, go against the dietary laws that identify your Jewish heritage.” “Peter, go against social custom and ritual. Eat with Cornelius, and risk being ostracized by those in Jerusalem who only reluctantly agreed to offer the gospel to the Gentiles.” So, Peter naturally objects the command to eat, perhaps thinking it was a cultural temptation.

As Joyce Hollyday challenges, “We can get like Peter, ... so preoccupied with the details of faithfulness that we sometimes lose sight of the big picture. ... At God’s command to kill and eat [the non-Kosher animals], Peter stammers something along the lines of ‘It wouldn’t be politically correct’ – or perhaps religiously correct is more to the point. But the Spirit...says [to Peter] it is time to break the rules. What matters is breaking down the barriers and distinctions between people. What matters is love. [Jesus said,] ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.’” [Hollyday, Joyce, “All Things New,” as read online at: [http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon\\_prep&item=LTW\\_950549\\_CEast5&week=C\\_Easter\\_5](http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=resources.sermon_prep&item=LTW_950549_CEast5&week=C_Easter_5)]

This early church event can be seen as simply a “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” transition isolated to dietary laws and an embrace of the Gentile movement. Yet, I read Scripture as a living text, and find this lesson to have broader implications for all the ways in which restrictions have kept and continue to keep the church from being truly welcoming and open to all persons – including scripturally-based restrictions of what is unclean, profane, or immoral. As such, I read this lesson as instructive for our current debates as a church about same sex marriage, and gay and transgender rights, which were voiced when we studied it at the men’s Bible study a week ago.

Peter had to argue his case for Gentile inclusion before the leaders of the Jerusalem Church. It seems that those who want a place at the table always have to make their case to the church – rarely does the church voluntarily say, “We have been wrong to exclude you – come, let us be one.” We have been schooled in a philosophy that a line has to be drawn somewhere, though isn’t it interesting we almost always draw lines so we are within the circle of “us.” There are those who argue we should not bow to cultural or political correctness. I agree that is not to be our standard, but people who act in faith are also accused of acting out of cultural or political correctness, as were a number of white Presbyterian pastors for their early involvement in the civil rights movement of the early 1960’s. The truth is the church has often marked its uniqueness by drawing more restrictive boundaries than does secular society.

Of course, the question is not really whether society or culture is ahead of the church – for society and culture are not to be our gauge. The greater question is whether the church is willing to keep up with the redemptive, inclusive love of Christ, who was constantly accused of cultural accommodation, crossing boundary lines of ritual uncleanness, and healing on days it was illegal.

Peter said, “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” As Will Willimon writes, “The real ‘hero’ of the story, the ‘star’ of the drama is neither Peter nor Cornelius, but the gracious and prodding One – [the Holy Spirit] – who makes bold promises and keeps them, who finds a way even in the midst of human distinctions and partiality between persons.” [Willimon, William, *Acts*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 99.]

Another writer suggests, “If those early disciples who stood much nearer the Christ-event than we, were not prepared for the Spirit’s fresh initiatives, how much less prepared are we? ... what might the Spirit have in store for us?” [*Texts for Preaching*, (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p. 307.]

I read this lesson as a challenge from God to the church: “Stop defining yourselves by who you exclude.” I hear the Spirit announcing through Peter, “Them has joined us!” and inviting me to ask myself who is missing – a “them” I have deemed unclean, or unworthy, or unfit, or profane – one whom Christ loves and welcomes and desires – one without whom we cannot be a complete “us”?