

God's Tablecloth Trick

Acts 11:1-18

June 5, 2005

Peter has found himself “in hot water” once again. Only this time it’s not he who has “put his foot into his mouth.” It is God who has put a vision into his head and commissioned Peter to do a new thing. The leaders in the church in Jerusalem have heard about his ministry among the Gentiles who do not observe the Jewish laws of purity. The church leaders are deeply concerned about accepting these ethnic persons into the community of Christian believers. Peter rehearses his story not to explain his own actions, but rather to tell of the astounding activity of God.

In the book of Acts a vision is a gift of God which lays out a picture of the future that God intends. It often calls into question a fundamental and defining principle. Peter’s vision comes as he is on the rooftop in prayer at the noon hour, a typical time for Jewish prayers. Peter sees a cloth lowered toward him filled with four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. These are among the animals declared unclean and prohibited for eating by the Jewish purity laws written in the book of Leviticus (ch. 11). The animals mentioned include camels, rock badgers, hares, pigs, eagles, vultures, buzzards, weasels, lizards, geckos and more. In the vision Peter is instructed to eat of these animals which he recognizes as unclean. He protests saying, “No way, Lord; I’ve never been unfaithful to the law; I’ve never polluted my mouth with anything that was not kosher.” The voice responds, “God says it is okay; eat.” This exchange takes place three times (remember that it sometimes takes Peter a long while to get it!) and then the cloth with the animals disappears.

As the vision ends, three men arrive from the home of Cornelius, an officer in the Roman military. Cornelius is a reverent man who also had a vision instructing him to send for Peter. His emissaries request that Peter visit Cornelius in another town, Caesarea. A Jew would normally be anxious about visiting a non-kosher household. He would worry that the table fellowship in which non-kosher food might be served would pollute him. The Holy Spirit urges Peter to follow them home, which he does. Peter, the Jew, is warmly greeted at the home of Cornelius, the Gentile. Surprised by the crowd that has gathered to receive him, Peter says, “You know that it has not been the social custom for Jews to socialize with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than another. Now why have I been summoned here?”

Cornelius shares the vision he received while praying, in which an angel told him to send for Peter that they might hear the word of God. He expresses a desire to hear about the work of God through Jesus Christ.

It appears that God has given complementary visions to Peter and to Cornelius. Representing the Gentiles, Cornelius expresses a yearning to grow deeper in the Christian faith. As a Jewish Christian, Peter is instructed to share the faith with those previously considered outsiders. The vision of God broadens the boundaries of the Christian mission. More importantly, God's love is so vast that it reaches beyond the limits of our human borders and prejudices. This new Christian community will be established upon a new code, the new commandment of Jesus: Love one another as I have loved you.

Peter is so caught up in this new understanding that he seizes the opportunity to preach. "The truth is that God plays no favorites. No matter who you are or where you are from, you are accepted by God as long as you respect God and do what is right." Peter tells them about Jesus, his ministry of doing good and healing; his death and resurrection; and the commissioning of disciples to be witnesses.

As he is preaching, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Gentile listeners. The Jewish Christians who had come with Peter are astounded at the generous outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon these foreigners. It is a Gentile Pentecost just as the Jewish Pentecost they had experienced earlier. Given that the gift of the Spirit has been given by God, Peter cannot deny them baptism with water. They are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter ends his testimony saying, "Seeing that God gave the Gentiles the same gift that God gave us when we believed in Jesus Christ, who was I to try to stop God?" Incapable of interfering with the mighty power of God, the church leaders are awed to silence. As they take in this remarkable happening, they are moved to praise God and to embrace this new thing that God is doing. The Gentiles are received as members of the body of Christ.

Table fellowship is a significant aspect of Middle Eastern culture. Eating together seals a friendship. Jews and Gentiles were prohibited from eating with one another because of the Jewish dietary laws. This new revelation opened to Christians the possibilities of table fellowship and new relationships. Dividing walls are broken down and unity is found in the life-giving power of Jesus Christ. Walls are transformed into tables more amenable to a community of forgiveness, acceptance, and compassion.

It reminds me of a grade school child who said, "God is like my principal." The adult in conversation with her thought, "How sad that this

child thinks of God as the final enforcer of rules.” But the child continued: “She [the principal] goes around the schoolyard at recess, making sure everyone gets a chance to play.” What a wonderful image of the nature and breadth of God’s inclusive love for the world: making sure everyone gets a chance to play, making sure everyone has an opportunity to be loved and experience grace.

The visions of Peter and Cornelius and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles demonstrate that God initiates a new “code” upon which the Christian community will be formed. God’s new code invites all who honor God and do what is right to receive the blessings of salvation. The gift of the Spirit is not limited by race, gender, age, or status. Even as Jesus embraced those cast out by society and religious rules, so now God’s Spirit enfolds outcasts. The Spirit of God cannot be restricted by human laws. You cannot argue with a religious experience. The Spirit blows where it wills, fulfilling its mission of saving, healing, turning, converting, and guiding the children of God. The Spirit of God cannot be hindered. We are called to take its lead and follow into new territory.

More than a vision about culinary purity, Peter’s vision is about the purity of God’s love, the purity of God’s grace. Oftentimes we separate ourselves from others based upon a small slice of a person’s being or behavior. Phobias and prejudices are frequently based on observance of outward dimensions with little knowledge of inward purity.

Although God does not discriminate by ethnicity, God is wise to call those who honor God and do what is right. By itself inclusivity is not a sufficient guide for Christian practice. Professor Douglas Jacobsen suggests that “inclusivity needs to be joined to its opposite virtue to ensure that it remains a healthy guide for our life together as the church....Anything taken to excess can threaten the delicate balances of life that define healthiness in an organism or social organization.” Opposite virtues are joined together when we speak of “servant leaders” or “tough love” or “civil disobedience.” Even in the Bible we find that God’s wrath and God’s love come to us together, breaking us down and building us up at the same time.

Jacobsen suggests that the opposite of inclusivity would not necessarily be exclusivity, but rather discernment. Paul urges us to “test the spirits” to see whether they are from God or not. “We are to discern the deeper meanings of the situations in which we find ourselves and not make judgments merely on the appearance of things....

“The goal of Christian inclusivity is to involve everyone in the redeeming realm of God’s grace. The goal of Christian discernment is to reflect on what such inclusivity requires, both of those doing the including

and those being included. Inclusivity directs us to accept and welcome anyone truly seeking to be a follower of Jesus; discernment emphasizes that Christian discipleship is not a glib undertaking. Inclusivity reminds us of the wonder of God's open-armed grace; discernment reminds us that grace is not cheap."¹

In today's reading from Acts, Peter is not suggesting that "anything goes." He offers several qualities to discern in Christians true to the faith: reverence for God; actions that are acceptable to God; belief in the Lord Jesus Christ; the gift of the Holy Spirit; and changes that reflect the new life one lives in Christ. There are standards, but perhaps not the ones we humans might design. There is accountability, but perhaps the judgment best be left to God, for we all are fallible. Our role is to be discerningly inclusive, to open the table to all who desire to grow in faith and in the knowledge and love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

During World War II in France some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to a cemetery to have him buried. The priest gently asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic. The soldiers did not know. The priest sadly informed them that in that case, he could not permit burial in the church yard.

So the soldiers dug a grave just outside the cemetery fence. And they laid their comrade to rest. The next day the soldiers came back to add some flowers—only to discover that the grave was nowhere to be found.

Bewildered they were about to leave when the priest came to speak to them. It seems that he could not sleep the night before, so troubled was he by his refusal to bury the soldier in the parish cemetery. So early in the morning he left his bed, and with his own hands, he moved the fence – in order to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.²

My friends, truth demands that we build some fences. But grace demands that the shape of those fences be flexible. Inclusivity asks that the faith be made available to all. Discernment means that those who are true to the faith will follow its demands. Discipleship requires that we build a table to include all who love God and who act and live as God desires. Grace requires that those who fall out of faithfulness be forgiven and welcomed to the table again and again and again.

¹ Douglas Jacobsen, "Inclusive and discerning?" *The Christian Century*, April 21-28, 1999, pp. 440-442.

² Susan Andrews, quoted in *Homiletics*, May 9, 2004, p. 24.

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