

Radically Inclusive
Acts 11:1-18
Fifth Sunday of Easter
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In chapter 10 of Acts, Luke relates a long story about Peter going to Caesarea, to the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Led there by God, Peter enters the house of Cornelius, eats with him and his household, teaches them about Jesus, and baptizes Cornelius and his whole household. This marks the first significant outreach to gentiles by the Jewish followers of Jesus.

Our sermon text, for today, comes from Acts, chapter 11, verses 1 through 18. Some of the circumcised believers, in Jerusalem, criticize Peter and expect him to explain his actions of reaching out to and baptizing gentiles.

Listen for God's word to you in this reading:

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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.

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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.

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.' 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?"

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."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Many times, in scripture, you may read the same story repeated two, even three times. A reader might think, "Why is this repeated, I just read that, I know what happened." Repetition is important. When we see this, it is a sign that something significant is going on. We should pay attention.

In chapter 11, Peter, in answer to criticism, retells the events of chapter 10. So, we should recognize this as an important story.

Word had gotten back to the church in Jerusalem that Peter had gone to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Some of the believers, the "circumcised" ask Peter: "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Not only had Peter eaten with gentiles but he had baptized them!

In our eyes, Peter had extended the church beyond the Jewish people, but the complaint against him is that he had dinner with uncircumcised men." Strictly forbidden by Jewish law, associating and eating with Gentiles was very taboo. You may remember that Jesus was criticized for the same type of behavior. Peter responds to his accusers by telling them what had happened, "step by step."

While he was at the house of Simon, the tanner, Peter was praying when he fell into a trance and had a vision. He saw: "Something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to [Peter]." The sheet was filled with all sorts of animals: "four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air."

A voice told Peter: "Get up; kill and eat." Naturally, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." After this happens three times, men arrive seeking Peter, and he is told to, "go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." Peter, along with six other believers, goes with the men to Caesarea, to the house of Cornelius.

Cornelius informs Peter that he had been visited by an angel who told him: "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved."

Then Peter tells the believers in Jerusalem: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit.'"

These events led Peter to conclude: "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?"

If we look at Peter's actions, taking into account the context of his time, we see that what he did was radically inclusive. In the beginning, after Pentecost, the followers of Jesus, what we call the church, were Jewish people who had heard the teachings of Jesus and the preaching of Peter and other disciples. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they had been baptized into faith in Jesus the Christ. In this story, Peter, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, went well beyond not just the geographical boundary of Jerusalem, but ethically beyond the pale of acceptable society.

Entering the house of not just any Gentile, but the house of a Roman centurion, a member of the occupying army of the empire, Peter ate a meal, taught the Gospel, and witnessed the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the whole household. Without Peter's actions in the house of Cornelius, which one could argue opened the door for all of Paul's missionary journeys; Christianity could have been limited to a sect within Judaism. Basically, without Peter's actions in this story from Acts chapters 10 & 11, the church we are sitting in, the community in which we worship,

Well...That is a gross simplification, and if we look at the story closer, it is simply not true. Peter, particularly in the beginning, is unwilling and just as closed minded as the 'circumcised believers' in Jerusalem. Presented with the sheet filled with animals and the invitation to 'kill and eat' Peter responds: "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." Peter is restricted by the same dietary laws that motivated the 'circumcised believers' to criticize him for eating with Gentiles. And it takes the voice from heaven saying: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane," THREE TIMES, before Peter can move on. Then, when the three men from Caesarea arrive, the Spirit instructs Peter to, "go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."

Somewhere, along the journey to Caesarea, Peter caught on to what God was doing. Because, in chapter 10 verses 27 & 28, when he entered the house of Cornelius, Peter said: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Peter understood the lesson of the sheet filed with animals. It was not about dietary laws, what was clean and unclean to

eat. The message, supported by the instruction to go with the men, "and not to make a distinction between them and us," was about people. The message to Peter is that he was not to call profane, those whom God has made clean.

You see, Peter is not the main character acting in this story. What Peter does is less important to the outcome than we might first think. It is not Peter who is radically inclusive in our story, it is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit communicates with Peter in his vision. The Spirit appears to Cornelius, as an angel, telling him to send for Peter. The Spirit sends Peter with the men to Caesarea. And it is the Holy Spirit that fell upon the house of Cornelius when Peter began to teach about Jesus Christ. Peter himself recognizes what is going on and remembers the words of Jesus: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." The main character of this story is the Holy Spirit. Peter is merely a witness to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world.

This is an important lesson for us to remember. We get caught up in thinking that we are the ones who grow the church, or that we need the pastor to grow the church. God alone: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is head of the church. And God acting in the world, will grow the church. Our role, like Peter's is to witness to what God is doing in the world. At best we can draw attention to what God is doing in peoples' lives. And lest we forget, it is not up to us whom God makes clean, and we are not to call them profane.

Our lesson today shows us that the Holy Spirit acts in a radically inclusive way. And we, like Peter, must be willing to respond in a radically inclusive way. Do not make a distinction between us and them. The human tendency is to separate, but God's tendency is to include. Humans want to divide between us and them. God says do not distinguish. Sometimes we want to determine and control who is allowed into the church. Yet, only God can make that determination. People, and even churches, want to grow and expand, but too often they mean they want to grow by attracting: "people like us." Whatever "like us" might mean: same race, same social standing, same economic range, same sexual orientation, same nationality, same way of seeing the world. But, in God's way of seeing, that is not what makes people "like us." The people "like us" in God's way of seeing are the ones filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter recognized this very thing in the household of Cornelius, when he reported to the believers in Jerusalem: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us in the beginning." Peter recognized that when the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles they became "just like" the believers in Jerusalem.

And the lesson for us is that those whom God chooses through the Holy Spirit are "just like us", and we must realize, like Peter: "If then God gave them the

same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who [are we that we can] hinder God?"

When Peter was done speaking to the believers in Jerusalem, Luke tells us: "When they heard this, they were silenced." I don't think we should read into this that it meant they were left speechless. Instead, I think Luke is telling us that all of their arguments, criticisms, and limited views of who is part of the church were gone. They had nothing left to argue that Peter had done anything wrong. Our response, like their response, should be to praise God and say: "Then God has given even to [those not like us] the repentance that leads to life!"

Let us pray:

Lord, help us to seek the Holy Spirit in the world, and the hearts of others. Even the ones we see as different, from us. Open our hearts to all men and women and direct us in witnessing to the world that you are radically inclusive. AMEN.