

Sermon: Acts 11.1-18

Delivered Sunday May 19th, 2019, The Fifth Sunday of Easter. Lessons: Acts 11.1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21.1-6; Gospel of John 13.31-35

I am old enough to remember a time even in the late 70's and early 80's of the 20th century, growing up in a small town where we never wore seatbelts, or in a small town, the cops tended to look the other way when it came to things like drinking and driving. My dad told me stories when he was in his early twenties back in the mid 60's, when the guys at the factory where he worked at, on a Friday afternoon, when the final whistle blew signalling the end of the week, everyone would climb into their cars and go to the local bar and have a few beers, or in some cases a lot, and then they would all drive home and nobody thought too much of it. My dad even remembers being stopped by a police man one time, and he had had a little too much to drink, and the cop just told him: get home! And that was it!

But then things changed. Our society changed. I think we actually began to realize that our policies or our traditions we grew up with, weren't always for the best: that they were creating victims, that people were dying and they were causing a lot of hurt, and so we changed collectively as a society, and dare I say, for the better. And this wasn't just a bleeding hearts liberal idea that seatbelts save lives, or that Mothers against Drinking and Driving had a point, but this was everyone, conservatives and liberals alike, and all people of common sense, where we all got together and said: yeah, we have seen a light, we have come to a new understanding, and so for the most part, we don't do those things anymore, because the only people who still do those things are boneheads, because the rest of us grew up, and yes, things change!

Now I want you to keep those two stories in the back of your head, because in our one reading from The Book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles, when the apostle Peter was in the city of Joppa praying, he too, saw the light, or he had a vision where down came this huge blanket with those creepy crawling snakes and vultures, and reptiles and other weird animals attached to its four corners, and three times, Peter heard a voice that said: “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” And three times, Peter replied to this voice, saying: “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.”

You see, Peter’s response to the divine picnic that God was offering him, was to essentially say “no thanks,” because what was being served on the menu for Peter was simply repulsive because as an observant jew, Peter had spent his whole life trying to remain ritually clean and faithful to his understanding of the torah, of the faith of his ancestors, that which had been handed down to him and was understood as holy, and the food that God was now offering him, none of those animals were acceptable food.

And yet, Peter is here in a vision, being given a new understanding that not only now are all foods clean and nothing is profane because the Lord has made them, but now Peter is even told to go hang out with gentiles and to preach to them the same word of God, the teachings that Jesus taught him, that now even extends to the gentiles, and that God is even now including them in his saving work that leads to everlasting life.

Now again, this might be hard to imagine, but in ancient times, the jews honestly believed that God had set them to be apart from other people to be a holy example to

others. From Deuteronomy, they would have heard: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (Deuteronomy 14.2)

But now, this vision that Peter has received and this voice of the Holy Spirit has told him to go with these gentiles who have showed up at his doorstep and to go stay in the house of a gentile Centurion, by the name of Cornelius. In fact, Peter says to those Jews who were questioning everything that he was now doing, that was circumventing every bit of Jewish tradition and identity that had been handed down to them, that the reason he went with them was because: “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.”

And when Peter arrives at the house and he begins to preach to them, Peter sees how the Holy Spirit falls upon them just as it had upon the original disciples, and he sees that the gentiles respond with as much faith and devotion as they had when they received the Holy Spirit, which leads 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 to get in the way of God?” And at that point, all of Peter’s detractors became silent, because they realized that it was God and through the power of his Holy Spirit who was ordaining and sanctioning this, to be acceptable.

Now I think this lesson for today, speaks volumes to us as modern day disciples of Christ, who in our own way, like Peter, we have our own gentiles and our own definitions of whose clean, and whose not clean, of whose in, and whose out, and like Peter, it’s like we have in our day and age, this huge blanket from God being unfurled before us, carrying with it the promise of God’s unimaginable generosity and mercy and love,

and inclusiveness for all humankind; where God is laying out before us a blanket that erases all boundaries, prejudices, society conditioning, and dare I say distinctions.

So I wonder, who would be our gentiles today? Because in our very polarizing society; we have many to choose from. Could they be from those of the other political party, that other denomination, that other faith tradition, that other ethnicity, that other lower or higher social economic class, that other race, or once again, dare I say, those of a differing sexual orientation?

And I know this is not easy. You take that last group of people I mentioned. Right now, we have seen in our Anglican Church in Canada and around the world, how much we are struggling with this question concerning the legitimacy of same-sex marriages. And in part, I believe the reason people are sincerely struggling with this is that our situation is not that much different than Peter, who in the same way, everything that he previously knew and was brought up to believe about what Holy Scripture says about gentiles and unclean food and sinfulness, and cleanliness, is being challenged and pushed and stretched to the limits of comfort as we try to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to our Church about these matters.

There are those among us who believe that Holy Scripture is the word of God, and I must confess, as your priest, so do I, but yet I also tell you, that as Christians, and as Anglicans, that through the grace of God, we believe that the word of God became flesh, became incarnate. What we believe is that the word of God is not so much to be found in a book, as it is to be found in a person, and that person is Jesus Christ. From the seventh article of our 39 Articles of Religion found in the Book of Common Prayer, we believe that all what is found in the Old and New Testaments, that

the end of the words of the prophets and of God's commandments is the work of everlasting salvation by offered to humankind by Christ.

So In the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, when a certain lawyer asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment and would lead to eternal life, Jesus summarized all of the torah, all of holy scripture, by stating: "That thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first and great commandment And the second is like unto it: thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

And then later, on the evening of The Last Supper, where our gospel lesson for today comes from, Jesus reiterated this same call to love to his disciples by saying: "Therefore I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Because by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13.34)

My brothers and sisters, through the mystery of the incarnation, God showed up for us in the person of Jesus Christ. And the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, still dwells among us, and his gift of the Holy Spirit which was imparted to his disciples, is the same Holy Spirit that is given to us, and we too are being called to see and serve Christ in all peoples, who through the Holy Spirit calls us to a conversion of heart where just like Peter, we too many cross the invisible fences or barriers that separate us from each other and like Peter, we too may say: who am I to get in the way of the Lord?

Now again, I understand and appreciate how complicated and how personal an issue this is for people. And I believe there are no simple and easy answers, but what I do believe is that we are encouraged to keep praying together, and to keep coming to each other's tables.

In some ways, it reminds me when me and my brother were little, and we used to fight like cats and dogs about everything, but at supper time, mom and dad would call us to the supper table, and the rule was that no matter what we were arguing about, how to stop, because we will at least come to the table together and be a family; a family that cares for each other and keeps talking to each other because this is the only way that we will deal with our divisions is not by drifting apart, and not by vilifying each other but by sincerely confessing that sometimes we do not know all things, especially as our first two lessons for today point out that in Christ Jesus, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, God is doing a new thing, and that often this new thing is going to challenge us because when it comes to God's love, there are no limits to how wide God wants us to draw the circle of inclusion around each other, because by this, as Jesus tells us, that the world shall know that we are his disciples. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.