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“The Beloved Community”

Acts 11:1-18

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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. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵‘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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If 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?’ ¹⁸When 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.’



I am grateful to my friend the Rev. Tim Hughes-Williams for his paper for our preaching group By the Vine on Acts 11. Tim unpacks the historical and scriptural context for us. He points us toward Leviticus 11—we could read the whole chapter for an exhaustive catalogue on dietary practices, but Leviticus 11:2-8 give us a fair taste:

From among all the land animals, these are the creatures that you may eat. ³Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud—such you may eat. ⁴But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁵The rock badger, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁶The hare, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁷The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. ⁸Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you. (Leviticus 11:2-8)

It is difficult for us, far removed from the cultural context of the Old Testament world to really catch the magnitude of Peter's vision. We tend to see dietary restrictions in very legalistic terms, a matter of obedience that, in some cases, may seem a bit trivial or even ridiculous to us today. But there is far more at stake than simple obedience or even legal concerns.

Hebrew dietary regulations were not just a matter of law, they were a matter of identity. Just three hundred years before the book of Acts was written, the Seleucid Greeks were encroaching on Israel and forcing Greek ways of life onto them. Teaching the Torah and circumcision were prohibited. The Temple was ultimately taken over and the Seleucids declared it a temple to Zeus and sacrificed a pig inside the Holy of Holies. Soldiers were then sent through all surrounding communities forcing Jews to eat pork upon penalty of death. Some refused, but many complied.ⁱ

[Worth noting, an old priest named Matthias refused to comply and killed a fellow villager who did. Matthias fled with his five sons—one of whom (Maccabeus) led the ultimate revolution to retake the city and Temple—a story commemorated in the festival of Hanukkah.]

All this to say, observance of the dietary laws was not just a matter of obedience to law, it was a matter of religious identity, a symbol of who Jews were as people of God.

It is this background that Peter faced when God told him to eat the "unclean" food. It is, in effect, a change from everything he had been taught as important in his faith. He faced nothing less than the total transformation of the shape and framework of his commitment to God. God was asking him to leave a place of security and identity and launch out into uncharted waters with nothing else than the word of God in a vision to guide him. This was no small thing that God asked of Peter.

So, what happens when God's new word contradicts tradition? Peter has only one option, as Willie James Jennings explains in his commentary: He must give voice to his experience.ⁱⁱ Here in Acts, Peter stands before his Jewish brothers and sisters in utter vulnerability. "He has no textual reference to fall back on, no prophetic utterance to conjure from the collective memory of his people. The prophets did not prepare him for this Gentile emergency."ⁱⁱⁱ Peter is speaking to those



who know him and know the faith. This is always the most difficult site from which to speak, isn't it? It's much more difficult to share a new or maybe even contradictory word to people whose opinion matters to you. Peter had no grounds on which to stand with his revelation, beyond simply his own experience. Step by step, Peter testifies—he shares his experience of God pressing in on him.

“The Gentiles have been touched by God, just as we have,” Peter says.

This is a miracle, yes, but it is also shocking news to faithful Jewish followers of the Way. Can you imagine it? Peter's not only done the unthinkable—visited and eaten with unclean Gentiles—now he's telling God's people that what he's done isn't only forgivable, it's a new word from God. It's a new way these early Christians should start living. Peter speaks, and then... his own people are reduced to silence.

It's the kind of silence that would make me cringe with discomfort. Who likes an awkward silence?! But Willie James Jennings hears something different in that quiet space:

This silence is a break in space, and time, and sound that God has orchestrated. This break does not silence Israel's past, but it is a break in the musical sense, in the sense of jazz improvisation. As Wynton Marsalis reminds us, in the break the band stops playing and leaves space for a soloist to play. In the break the soloist is alone for a moment carrying the time, suspended in air, and holding everything together in a singular performance...

Peter brings them to the break, but the Spirit of God carries the time, holding it in the silence. The moment of silence after the testimony reveals a God who has been keeping time beautifully and faithfully with Israel and now expects the hearers to feel the beat, remember the rhythm, and know the time. These listeners follow the break and join back into the ongoing song and praise of Israel. God has again done a marvelous thing beyond our anticipations: even Gentiles receive the repentance that leads to life (v18). This is a new song sung for those outside the household of faith.... The restoration of Israel will involve divine love for Gentiles. After the silence, God's love had modulated into a new key, but the rhythm and song of Israel continues. The beat goes on.^{iv}

Acts 11 is a moment of reorientation where the Spirit is teaching us a crucial lesson that the church must constantly remember: God yet speaks, and word of God always presses against word of God.^v What God has said in the past is pressed against by what God is saying now. Israel shows us that we are always positioned between these two words (the old word and the new) and destined for yet more hearing from a God ever extended toward us in grace. This in-between position has often been painful as the Body of Christ tries to discern the path ahead with all its twists and turns. And so our struggle as the church is twofold: we struggle to hear the new word that God is constantly speaking, and we struggle to see the link between the new word and the word previously spoken.

The church has always rightly grounded its thinking in historical continuity with the word of God in Scripture, tradition, and doctrine. For Christians, the past is extremely important, but what is far more important is how we deploy the past in order to prescribe present and future actions.



Certainly, the past matters. The church exists because God has spoken in the past, and without a sense of that history we lack clarity about our current path and journey. But the past, though important, is never the point for the life of faith. The point is the present moment with the living God who is with us now. The God who speaks to us now calls us into the risk of hearing a new word, a word that orients us toward the unanticipated and unprecedented where the reconciling God is active.

Peter found himself in the midst of such a world in Acts 11, where what God was doing in and through him among the Gentiles pressed him body and soul up against the word God had spoken to his own people, Israel. The key for us, seen in this moment for Peter, is to refuse the binary naming of the past word false and the present word true – or the present world false and the past word true – and to discern through the Spirit the line of continuity between past and present.

“You have heard it said, . . . but I say to you”—Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 point to the present and intimate speaking of the living God made flesh and one with us in the challenging task of hearing God’s words pressed against the old ones.

“The Beloved Community” is a term first coined more than a hundred years ago by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., however, who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning.

The core value of Dr. King’s Beloved Community was the idea of *agape* love. King distinguished between three kinds of love: *eros*, a sort of romantic love; *philia*, affection between friends, and *agape*, which he described as “understanding, redeeming goodwill for all,” an “overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative”—“the love of God operating in the human heart.”^{vi} He said, “*Agape* does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people — It begins by loving others for their sakes.” “*Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community.”

It's not difficult to trace this kind of thinking back to the emerging consensus among Jesus’ followers in Acts. The entire book is staged around dialogue, conflict, and revelation. It is a fact that the creation of true community across diversity generates conflict. Conflict is a feature, not a flaw, of the process. M. Scott Peck maps out four stages of community formation—these stages include experiences of chaos and emptiness, conflict and change. The fourth and final stage of community formation for Peck is called the “True Community.”^{vii} Peck states that True Community is both joyful and realistic. It requires “little deaths” in many of the individuals. Members begin to speak their most vulnerable truths and others will simply listen—hold the time, keep the tempo and stick with it in the midst of reorientation. It requires vulnerability, curiosity, and openness.

“What does a new word look like? We will know it by its fruit. That which builds life together, life abundant, and deepening life in God is truly a word from God.”^{viii}

Only a few verses after our passage, in Acts 11:26, it is the introduction of Gentiles to the church that occasioned the first use of the term “Christian.” A new name was needed to reflect the



greater diversity of Christ-followers. The New Testament is chock full of grace toward the outsider. Jesus and his church’s willingness to include them—to include people like us, and people not like us—make being a community that much more difficult, and that much more beautiful. Our very name “Christian” is born out of the wrestling that comes with finding the true, beloved community.

May we be brave enough and bold enough (like these believers in Acts) to be open to God’s word then and God’s word now. May we be open to the word and work of the Spirit – in order that our understanding might grow – and we might be a True and Blessed Community in this time and place.

ⁱ Dennis Bratcher, “The Voice: Fifth Sunday of Easter, Acts 11:1-18,” (May 19, 2019)

<http://www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Ceaster5ac.html>.

ⁱⁱ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 116.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 118.

^v *Ibid.*, 119.

^{vi} The King Center, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

^{vii} M. Scott Peck, “Four Stages of Community” adapted from *A Different Drum*, 1990

http://atlc.org/members/resources/four_stages_community.html.

^{viii} Jennings, 120.

