

Practicing Resurrection; Christian Community

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35, Easter 5C

Fort Hill Presbyterian, Laura Smith Conrad

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

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

John 13:31-35

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come.'" 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Proclamation of the Word

This passage at first take is one about Peter's dream and distinctive dietary laws which faithful Jews and the first Jewish Christians are to abide by.

But to those of us living in today's world, Biblical dietary laws can sound like the Dr. Suess poem,

*I will not eat them in a house, I will not eat them with a mouse
I do not like them here or there, I do not like green eggs and ham
I do not like them Sam I am (from Green Eggs and Ham)*

But these dietary laws still upheld by orthodox Jews, were important to identity. We are back today in the Acts of the Apostles where Peter gives witness to his new revelation about God's salvation and who can be included in that "repentance that leads to life."

When Peter recounts his dream of the unclean and clean animals his image of faithful practice is shattered. Eating customs were a matter of identity as the Jews are being asked to assimilate to the dominant culture of the Roman Empire.

A few years ago our family was the guest of some church friends at their home in an Island resort community. We had two small children in daycare while Chuck went to Graduate school and I worked as an associate pastor. We had time off but no money for a vacation, so some friends graciously allowed us to use their home for a week. But we soon discovered that while we could go to the house, we were not allowed to use any of the amenities. We had hoped to go to the pool or play tennis, but were not allowed access. Our hosts (who were back home) were not pleased and tried to help. It was sort of like being invited to a party, but not getting to go to the buffet or dance, but we could see what was going on and overhear the music.

Who is in and who is out?

Humanity has played out those questions since the beginning of time. God opens up the vision of his church- Acts 10 and 11- this is a mission to the outsiders

Two unlikely men brought together by God's vision for the Church of Jesus Christ.

A little background in Acts

the Holy Spirit has been unleashed,
gospel is being shared,
church is spreading,
some persecution,

even Saul, the persecutor of Christians is converted to Christ and becomes the chosen one to carry God's name before Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel. An Ethiopian Eunuch is baptized along with Simon the Sorcerer. Maybe you

have met other Christians who don't believe you and I are real Christians because we do not meet their certain criteria.

The Message of Acts is that God's spirit can work among those who God calls to faith regardless of our preconceived notions.

In fact, Peter is only one important instrument in today's lesson. The other is Cornelius the Centurion...Acts 10- member of Italian regiment, he and family were devout, God-fearing, gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. Cornelius also had a vision which was linked to Peter's. He was the one told by God in a dream to send the three men to Peter. Peter and Cornelius are being transformed by God and linked together as brothers. Peter comes to Cornelius' home and tells them about God's work in Jesus. This group of Gentiles have faith and are baptized by Peter.

Peter- already breaking customs- staying with Simon the Tanner (used boiled urine to tan the hides) considered a most unclean profession. Peter has already stepped outside his comfort zone for the sake of the mission. But...open and willing to follow. Disciples are those at times who say, "Lord, I do not know where you are leading me, but here I am." (Willimon, *Acts Commentary*) So the Holy Spirit is also leading Peter into new territory.

God's mission has been building as Simon the Sorcerer, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Gentile villages, even Saul the Persecutor of Christians, and to top it all off- a Roman soldier, his family, employees and neighbors.

This dream is not just about food and dietary laws, but about God's good news being shared with those who are labeled outsiders being brought into the Kingdom of God.

Who are we to hinder God?

I love when Peter tells what has happened and says, *"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 Jesus Christ is Lord of Heaven and Earth then why not of the soldier, the Pharisee, the Samaritan, eunuch, the magician.

God's grace is for everyone God calls.

"Who was I that I could hinder God?" Peter asks.

The Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem are confounded by Peter's testimony to those outside of the Jewish tradition being brought into God's kingdom. They criticize him for breaking with tradition, but, to give them credit, they listen to his story. They listen to Peter's testimony and praise God when others discover God's good news that leads to Life!

We have all at times set limits on who is in and who is out, who is worthy of God's goodness and faith, and who is not. But who are we to hinder God?

The early Christians in Acts were people trying to understand what God was up to in their changing world.

We are also people asking, "Where is God going next? What is God up to?"

What we know is that in that early church, God is creating a community of faith in this new world where Gentile and Jew learn from each other, worship together, share life together; therefore, the church of Jesus Christ is a place...

...where an outsider, a foot soldier for Caesar, and an insider, Peter who has walked with Jesus, are bound together by the Holy Spirit in this new community of faith.

where persons who are very different can become friends offering each other hospitality and loving one another.

Where children and youth teach us about the ways of the kingdom.

Where the church is present through you and me out in the places where we work, go to school, and live.

Where the old and young, male and female in the community shares dreams and visions of God's good news being shared.

Who are we to hinder God when others might know the Love of Jesus Christ, the freedom of God's grace, and the comfort and fellowship of the Holy Spirit?

If Peter knew that Cornelius was a person of faith by these marks:
God-fearing, devout, giving alms to those in need and constantly praying to God

We should hope that the life we lead and the words we say will mark us as God's own.

As Jesus' words in the gospel of John remind us today we are called to love one another.

By this the world will know that we are his.

Today four youth will profess their faith,
will remember the promises made in baptism on their behalf,
and will claim that they are marked as disciples.

They take on the responsibility of membership and can serve and lead in our church.

But most importantly they have received the gift of God's forgiveness and grace shown in Jesus Christ and claim it as their own.

Let us be like those early church members giving praise to God's name, and celebrating God's gracious love and mercy available to all.

For we do not own God,
but we do belong to God.