

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. 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.”

Acts 15:1-20

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So, they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we

have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.’ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.”

Our Scripture readings today are both from the Book of Acts. If you look at the table of contents in your Bible, this book is officially called “The Acts of the Apostles,” but, often, the Holy Spirit is the one acting, and the Apostles are along for the ride. The first reading is one of those times. The story takes place in Joppa, which is a port city, roughly where modern Tel Aviv is.

Peter receives a vision, and God tells him to eat things that are forbidden to good Jews. Things like beasts of prey, reptiles, like crocodiles, and birds of the air. All these things are forbidden to Jews to eat under the law, but are things that people around them eat.

As a good Jew, Peter has never in his life eaten any of these kinds of animals. Peter is not just being picky or holier-than-thou here. He really has never eaten any of these things, because the laws forbid it. An orthodox Jew today will not willingly eat these animals, for the same reason.

These concepts of clean and un-clean, insiders and outsiders, define the lives of God’s elect, the people of Israel. Everything and everyone is clean or un-clean, Jewish or Gentile, insider or outsider. There are entire chapters of the Law devoted to defining exactly who and

what fits in what category. Lawyers make their living arguing cases based on these chapters of the Law. This is a cornerstone of Hebrew identity.

The voice of God then says, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Right at that moment, three Gentile men, non-Jews, come to the house where Peter is staying. The Holy Spirit tells him to go with them, and not to make a distinction between “them and us,” between Jews and Gentiles. So, Peter goes, and he takes some other Christians along. His host explains that an angel had told him to send for Peter, and that Peter’s message would save him and his entire household.

Well, Peter only knows one message that can do that. Peter starts telling the story, you know the one, the story of Jesus the Christ. The Holy Spirit comes upon the household as it had on the disciples “at the beginning.” Peter sees this, and he says that, “If God gave them the same gift that God gave us, who am I to stand in God’s way?” He baptizes the whole household, from the *paterfamilias* to the tiniest baby in arms. They are not the first non-Jews to believe in Jesus Christ, you remember the Ethiopian eunuch, for example.<sup>1</sup> They are, though, among the first to be baptized in his name.

Then “certain individuals” come down from Judea. In a book that revels in naming names of people doing good things, these people are not named. These “certain individuals” are teaching more than genital surgery for half the population. They are teaching that Christians must become Jews to be Christians. Presumably that would include the dietary codes, among other rules.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 8 and my sermon *Grace in the Desert*, preached May 7, 2017.

You remember Saul, who held the coats of the people who murdered Deacon Stephen? Well, he is now Paul, and leading a Christian mission to the Gentiles. That is, those of us who are not of Jewish background. He and his partner Barnabas argue with these unnamed individuals. Then they and some of their opponents in the debate are chosen to go up to Jerusalem and discuss it with the Apostles and the elders. This is the first great Church council.

At this council, some of the Pharisees, who are now Christians but who are still Pharisees, insist that it is absolutely required that these Gentile Christians become Jews and keep the entire law of Moses. All the men circumcised, no mixing meat and dairy in their food, and bacon is right out.

Peter stands up and tells the story of his experience in Joppa. He says that he saw the Holy Spirit in these people's faces and in their lives, and, if God was making no distinction between "Them" and "Us," he did not believe that the Church ought to, either.

Paul and Barnabas tell the stories of their missions among the Gentiles, and reach much the same conclusion.

At the end of the discussion, James, the brother of Jesus lays out the decision of the council. They will tell these Gentile Christians to avoid things polluted by idols, to avoid fornication, and to avoid food that has been strangled and eating blood. But these Gentile Christians are accepted by the Church just like the Jewish Christians.

These Gentile Christians have come to accept Jesus Christ as Lord, and to follow him willingly. Accepting that Jesus is Lord is good, but it is not enough. Even the evil spirits whom Jesus threw out of people acknowledged who Jesus was. They, however, only obeyed him under

duress. Acknowledging that Jesus is Lord is good, but it is not enough. These Gentle Christians follow him willingly.

The Jewish Christians must accept something, too. They must accept that they are not the only ones who belong here. They must accept that not all Christians must be just like them. They must accept that their rules of clean and unclean, insiders and outsiders, are not the point. Those rules came from God, but they are a means to an end, not holiness in themselves. These rules may have been a cornerstone of their identity as the Hebrew people. They may have been how they defined what it was to be the people of God in the world. But, as followers of Christ, they and we have a new cornerstone, the one that the builders rejected.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus has told us what we need to do to build on that cornerstone of Christ and Christ's love. He has given us a new commandment, that we love one another. Just as He loves us, we also must love one another. We must love everyone, even our enemies. Even people whom we believe to be enemies of God. Jesus forgave those who executed him, and he commanded us to love like he did. If other people do not experience God's love, through us and people like us, how can they be anything other than God's enemies?

That is how everyone will know that we are Christians – if we love other people. They really will know that we are Christians by our love. Being Pharisees about the rules, or placing “how we have always done it” over loving our neighbors, all our neighbors, is straying away from Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:22; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7.

Any congregation, any church program that is not built solidly on that cornerstone of Christ and Christ's love for all God's children is doomed to failure. It is a human program, not Christ's. It doesn't matter what we call it or what pious-sounding words we say or who blesses it.

Many people will build on that cornerstone. God wants all of them who are truly building on that cornerstone of Christ and Christ's love to succeed, together. We all know that any mother, biological or not, wants her children to be together and to love each other. God, who loves us even more than our mothers do, wants that, too, for all of God's children.

So, what do we do about this? Go out there, and love your neighbors. All your neighbors. Genuinely want them to be healthy and safe and to have what they need. Then act to help make that happen.

Use the gifts you have been given.

Donate, if you can.

Speak out.

Vote. Every election.

Our neighbors include our neighbors who have different color skin than we do. They include our neighbors who speak other languages. They include our neighbors who dress differently than we do. They include our neighbors who love other adults differently than you may. They include whomever else you thought of when I said, "All your neighbors." Every one of them is God's child, made in God's image.

God loves all of God's children. God wants us all to be healthy and safe and to have what we need, together. If we are following Christ, then we should all want that, too.

If we really want it, we will act to help make it happen.

AMEN.