

May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Acts 11:1-8 “What’s on the Menu?”

I want you to take a moment to think about how important it is to gather around a table for food. I’m not talking about the act of eating itself. Eating is different. When we’re busy, we tend to eat on the run. I know in the morning if I haven’t budgeted enough time to sit down and have a “real” breakfast, I grab one of these as I’m running out the door. We jokingly call these “loser’s breakfasts” in our house. That’s not intended to be a judgement call or anything, but it is an informed choice. It’s better than not eating at all, right? And it gives you 12 grams of protein which is what the body needs to start the day off so that we have enough energy to do what we need to do. But you know what’s better than a loser’s breakfast? Early riser special #6 at the Cozy Diner. That’s two slices of French toast made with their specialty cinnamon swirl bread with crispy bacon and scrambled eggs. That, my friends, is a winner’s breakfast! Perfect balance of salty and sweet, carbs and protein. But even then, it’s just not the same if I don’t have company. Does it still taste good? For sure! But it’s better when I have the worship team with me to talk about the scripture for Sunday morning and whatever else is on our minds. That’s what makes the experience even more special. Food *and* fellowship. Who you eat with is on par with what you eat.

When our kids were growing up, we made it a point to have at least one face-to-face meal a day at the table where we

could talk about what's going on in life. The TV was not allowed to be on, phones had to stay silenced and in your pockets, or better yet not at the table at all. As the kids reached adulthood and started moving out in stages and working jobs with incompatible schedules this became a more difficult goal to achieve. But we still tried our best to create a space where we could eat and fellowship. Now that Connor's out of the house, the dynamics and concerning meals are different. It's hard cooking for two. Last week Mary and I had a busier than average week which put us behind in keeping up with one of our favorite TV shows which is, if you're curious, "The Last of Us." And Gwen, this is a far better zombie show than "Walking Dead." Tugs at the heart strings a little more. Anyway, we had a rare evening with no meetings or events, which meant we could squeeze in an episode or two of *The Last of Us*. Mary made a "shame bowl" which is what we call leftovers from the refrigerator that are scooped into a bowl and zapped in the microwave for a couple of minutes. She made her shame bowl first. After mine finished warming up, I went out to the dining room table, but there was Mary on the couch in living room in front of the TV cueing up our zombie show. I said, "Wait a minute, the rule is no eating meals in front of the TV." She said, "You see anyone in this room who we need to set an example for?" Oreo's sitting there begging saying, "Hey, I really don't care where you all eat just save a bite or two for me, okay?" It's funny though, because we haven't eaten in front of the TV since then. This can be partially attributed to not having another free evening, but I'd like to

think it's because we recognized that even when it's just us, the time spent at the table in conversation is what feels best.

Okay, now I want you to imagine a big celebration you've had in the past with your loved ones gathered around you. This is a celebration that took place around a table with food. Maybe it was a graduation picnic or a wedding feast or maybe a holiday meal like Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter. Have you got that imagine in your mind now? Is it clear whose faces are around the table? Friends? Family? Both? Now quick – what are you eating? You probably don't have to think about that one for long. Our celebrations often revolve around familiar or favorite foods, and our recollections of these events probably contain as many memories of flavors and smells as they do conversations and relationships. Except maybe when you have a politically diverse family and you're eating Thanksgiving two weeks after an election. “So what was on the menu at your house for Thanksgiving?” “Oh, we had grilled tension with a side of bitter conflict and not-so-humble pie for dessert.” Anyway, let's get back to what's on our menu and imagine that meal again. What's on the plates? Is it turkey and dressing? Prime rib? Ham? Lasagna? Fajitas? Apple pie? Okay, now I want you to picture yourself in the same place and situation. Everyone's gathered around the table ready to see what traditional meal is going to come out of the kitchen. And then SURPRISE! You end up with something completely different on your plate. How do you feel?

Startled? Disappointed? Upset? Hold on to that feeling for a moment.

Now let's talk about the vision Peter had when he was on that rooftop in Joppa. His attention to detail explaining *that* menu went far beyond tradition and expectation. For him, it was a matter of faithfulness to God and God's law. As a Jewish person, to eat the things that were on that sheet in his dream would mean more than just a change of menu. In his understanding, it was as much of a sin as theft, lying, adultery or murder. For Peter to come to terms with these menu changes, at least enough to announce to the believers of Judea that the items on the sheet are okay to eat, was life-changing. See, he had been told by a voice from heaven: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Okay, so you think the *menu* is surprising? Wait until you hear about *who* to expect at the table! We sometimes say, "You are what you eat." But those in Peter's time and place would have found it *equally* important to say, "You are whom you eat *with*." See, Jews did *not* eat with Gentiles. They did not accept their hospitality. To do so would mean they would become culturally and spiritually polluted. "Unclean" was the term used in Judaism. So the menu has changed and so have the guests at the table. This radical change caused quite a stir among the followers of Christ who were a vast Jewish majority in those early days of the Jesus movement. In our time, we can distinguish Christians and Jews quite well. We worship on Sunday in our church with a

steeple and traditions and images that are unique to our faith, while Congregation Beth Israel worships in their synagogue with images and traditions that reflect their faith. But in first Century Judea and even in the northern parts of the Empire, this Jesus movement, also known as “The Way,” was seen as just another sect of Judaism. So when Peter came along and told an exclusively Jewish community, “If then God gave the Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” that’s a big deal. The gift he’s talking about, by the way, is the Holy Spirit. For that community of Jewish believers, this would be an offensive notion. Now – let’s put ourselves in this context for a moment. Let’s re-visit Peter’s declaration and bring it a little closer to home. “If then God gave the Holy Spirit to ...” And here’s where I want *you* to fill in that blank. Who or what would replace the word “Gentile.” Who or what would seem so offensive to you that you’d say to a member or leader in your church, “Why did you eat with *those* people? Why did you *seek them out* in the first place?” I’m sure it doesn’t take much time to come up with the answer to that hypothetical question. I’m sure we all can recall individuals or groups of people that we once considered “unclean” during seasons of our lives who would fit this category. If you’ve ever been a part of a church where some folks left in a huff because the church decided to expand its circle of inclusion to someone they didn’t like, you know what I’m talking about. And the ones who left might have even justified their actions by saying, “Well the Bible clearly says that ‘those people’ are unclean.” How is

that different from what we see happening in this story in Acts? And you know what? The Jewish believers could legitimately say, “Well the Torah clearly says ...” And yet Peter still said, “who am I that I could hinder God?”

The church has a history of identifying and classifying those who they believe are “unclean” or “unredeemable.”

Typically, they’ve been people of a *minority* ethnic or racial group, although in the case of our scripture today, the *Jewish believers* were the minority in a predominately Gentile culture. The irony is that a few hundred years after the book of Acts was written, one of the first groups that faced organized persecution by the church were Jews! And when you think about it, that’s been an on-again-off-again issue globally for twenty centuries. We love the Jews. We hate the Jews. Other groups like Cathars, Waldensians, various indigenous and enslaved populations, racial minorities, gender and sexual minorities – you name it, and I know I’m leaving some out of the ongoing “unclean” list. And you might be thinking, “Well, yes, there was a time in our recent history when black folks were not welcome in white churches, but we’ve become more civilized and we know better now.” If that’s the case, I’d invite you to look up the Asatru Folk Assembly that openly presents and promotes itself as a “Whites Only Church.” Now, it’s true that churches who *explicitly* proclaim that they’re whites only are a rare minority, but the ones whose prejudice is *implicit* and hidden are plentiful. And honestly, I’m afraid that the social checks and balances that have prevented the implicit

churches from becoming explicit seem to be disintegrating. Yes, “White Christian Nationalism,” I’m looking at you because lately, more and more people are using that term and saying, “Yes, that describes me.”

Here’s another thing to consider - churches that are welcoming to the LGBTQ community are still in the minority. I hope that someday in the future churches will look back through their histories and say, “we know better now.” But here we are. Who do we have in the church today who speaks like Peter? “Who am I ... who are we ... that we could hinder God?” And when the people in Judea heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles or blacks. Or whites. Or Hispanics. Or LGBTQ folks the repentance that leads to life.” May our eyes also be opened so that we too may repent and receive the fullness of life.