

May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Acts 11:1-18 “What Is a Real Christian?”

I know I’ve been joking a lot about how long we’ve been studying Luke and Acts, but I’ve got to give the author credit for being a master at foreshadowing. He doesn’t waste any words. Everything he says means something. Our problem is that we’re 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans reading 1<sup>st</sup>-century middle eastern scripture. We miss out on a *lot* of little clues and subtleties that meant something to the original audience. *We* don’t know what they mean, but *they* did. For example, the scripture passage we studied last week about Peter raising Tabitha from the dead ended with an odd sentence - “Meanwhile Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.” I didn’t spend any time on this verse last week because I knew it would just seem like a random point of information. But it was much more important than that. That little point of information was actually setting us up for a major turning point in the Book of Acts.

Here’s the question that Luke’s audience would have been asking after reading that verse. They would say, “What the heck is Peter doing staying with a *tanner*?!” The reason they’d be asking this is that tanning leather is an unclean profession. I mean, sure, making leather is probably a messy business, but in the Jewish religious tradition, it’s considered *ritually* unclean because you’re dealing with dead animals -- some of which fit into the category of “forbidden to touch.” And for Peter, who was a Jew, staying in the house of a tanner would be considered scandalous because technically speaking he wouldn’t be able to approach God in any way so long as he was ritually unclean by proximity. So this little-bitty sentence in chapter 9 is a *big* setup for chapter 10 where we read of a vision Peter had about all these ritually impure animals floating down from the heavens on a cloth sheet. In that vision, God told Peter to “Get up, kill and eat.”

Chapter 10 also gives an account of a non-Jewish Roman Centurion named Cornelius who became a follower of Jesus. Up until then, the

general population assumed that Christians were just another Jewish sect, and that everyone who followed Jesus was, by default, Jewish. And, for a time, that was mostly true. But the vision that God gave to Peter was to illustrate how God doesn't consider *anyone* unclean or beyond the reach of God's grace. The takeaway verse in chapter 10 is when Peter told Cornelius, "God shows no partiality, but in *every* nation *anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of *all*." And you know what we say about this, right? All means ... all. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Chapter 11, which is what Barbara read earlier, is the practical application of this "all means all" message.

When we jump into chapter 11 we learn that when the apostles back in Judea heard that Peter was over on the coast bringing non-Jewish Gentiles to Jesus, they weren't happy. Luke says they criticized him. But Peter told them about his vision of the unclean animals and God's message to kill and eat and how that vision made it clear to him that non-Jewish people could be followers of Christ too. Now here's where the Holy Spirit came on board – The apostles, upon hearing Peter's explanation, basically said, "Well then, I guess it's settled. Gentiles are welcome too. Huzzah!" No arguments. No secret committees. No controversy. No petulance. No threats. Just, "Praise the Lord, God loves the Gentiles!" Spoiler alert. That generous attitude didn't last very long. In fact, the question about whether Gentiles could be Christians became the first major kerfuffle in the church. But that's a story for another day. For today, let's just celebrate the origin of "all means all." Let's bask in the light of the Holy Spirit today because that's who this story is about. It's not about Peter. It's not about the other apostles. It's not about Cornelius or Simon the tanner. It's about the Acts of the Holy Spirit which is what this book should be called anyway.

The Holy Spirit is what drives the church. The Holy Spirit is who gives us the vision to discover who we are and what we should do. But because we are humans who live in a world that doesn't always make

sense, we want to shut our doors to the Holy Spirit. “Uh-oh, is Jesse going to start picking on us about the way we worship and tell us that if we aren’t playing rock-n-roll praise songs and raising our hands we’re not doing it right? I mean, he did introduce a new song this morning.” No. Even churches who worship like that are just as guilty about shutting their doors to the Holy Spirit as churches who are more reserved in their worship.

I discovered an inconvenient truth about ministry a while ago. Let me back up. I discovered an inconvenient truth about ministry and then re-discovered it over and over again because I have a hard time accepting it. The lesson? My biggest failures in ministry are when I try to shape the future to conform to my desires. I get restless and impatient when I feel like things aren’t going the way I think they should. I get bogged down in “what ifs.” “What if I did A instead of B?” Or, “What if this program I tried fails and everything collapses and our church dies?” Or, “What if I don’t do everything perfect and disappoint people?” These are the times when the Holy Spirit nudges me and says, “First of all, you’re using the word ‘I’ *way* too much. It’s not all about you. It’s not even all about the people in the church. It’s not about programs. It’s not about what music you are or aren’t using. It’s not about whether you’re keeping up with the latest trends in church growth. It’s about being faithful and trusting that *God* is always faithful.” As cliched as it sounds, we need to “Let go and let God.”

You might say, “But that doesn’t seem to be what’s going on in the Book of Acts. It looks like everyone has a plan and they’re being really proactive in carrying it out!” And you know what, that certainly does seem to be the case. This whole three-chapter arc seems to be a prime example of Peter going out there and getting stuff done. It seems like he’s being very strategic and successful about bringing the Gentiles to God. But when you go back and look closer, you realize that, once again, this isn’t about Peter. It’s about God’s work through the Holy Spirit. Notice that from start to finish, God always acts first. God visited Cornelius *before* giving Peter his vision. Peter did not “bring” God to the

Gentiles. He simply followed where God already was. Think about the number of times throughout history when the church has inflicted harm on others. Times when “bringing God to the Godless heathens” has resulted in the displacement and death of native people. Compare this to the times when the ones who came in to proclaim the good news recognized that God was there already. They just helped the folks who lived there to recognize this too. This is what happened in Acts. God was there among the Gentiles. God was already at work. The apostles were just there to carry out what God had already planted in the people’s hearts. We, as people created in the image of God, have that divine image in us. It’s literally written in our DNA. Is it true that “all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory” as Paul says in Romans? Yup. Is it true that sin prevents us from having the fullest relationship with God that we can? Yup. But part of that “inconvenient truth” of ministry that I learned and have to keep re-learning is that I need to step back and let God do the majority of the work because God is already at work in and among all creation.

So then, what *is* our work? Our work is bearing witness to what God has done in and through us. Furthermore, I believe that we need to bear witness to what God is doing in and among others too. That’s called “testimony.” And testimony is a lost art. That’s why we spend the biggest part of our Pentecost celebration at Wildwood Park giving testimony. It helps us recognize where God is at work. And yes, I’m prepping you for Pentecost in the Park. We’ve got two more Sundays to go until that service. Be thinking about how you’ve seen God at work in your life and in the lives of others. The early church excelled in this lost art. That’s the beauty of the Book of Acts. That’s why we make such a big deal out of Pentecost. This is ministry and witness in its purest form.

Speaking of “pure,” I can’t leave you all this morning without dealing with this strange vision that Peter had on the roof of Simon the tanner’s house about all the ritually unclean animals coming down from the sky on a sheet. Luke believes this vision is so important that he included it in chapters 9, 10 and 11. Remember, Luke doesn’t waste words. Why

would he write about this vision three times *verbatim*? Because it is a game changer. It poses the question, “How does something that has always been impure all of a sudden become pure?” To put it more simply, “How does something unclean become clean?” This question is key to this passage and key to the Good News of Christ and it helps us when we are trying to figure out who or what is a “real” Christian.

There are so many whom the church over its 2,000 year history has labeled as impure: LGBTQ folks, people of color, women, people of other faiths. The people in the earliest manifestation of the church were sure that Gentiles ... non-Jewish people ... were out of bounds. But we’ve got 3 chapters here in Acts pounding into our heads that, “God shows no partiality, but in *every* nation *anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Who in our community is considered “out of bounds?” Murderers? Immigrants? Pro-Gun advocates? Anti-Vaxers? Democrats? Republicans? Muslims? Evangelicals? Who are *we* to label those who are clean and unclean in God’s sight? As Peter told Cornelius in verse 28 of chapter 10, “God has shown me that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean.” That’s what this vision was all about. You don’t get to determine who the “real” Christians are or are not. That’s God’s work. Your work is to shine light on where God is already at work. All these people who you’ve been taught are out of bounds? These are people who are created in the image of God. What would it mean to eat dinner with them and actually witness how God might be working in and through them? This doesn’t mean we’re trying to justify or condone discrimination, oppression or abuse – you know “*siy-un*” in all of its manifestations. Indeed, we must hold one another accountable to justice, but we can do so without declaring others impure or unclean even as they may be saying the same things against us.

The message of Easter is that Jesus is victorious over the powers of sin and death. Jesus gave his life for Jew and Gentile alike. This is the gospel we proclaim as a church of the resurrection. This is why we boldly proclaim “He is risen.” (He is risen indeed.)