

Acts 11:1-18

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Series C)

Lessons for the Day: Acts 11:1–18; Revelation 21:1–7; John 16:12–22

Yes, Them Too!

May 15, 2022

“Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Throughout history, all societies have had to struggle with the fact that there are those who have—and there are those who have not. There are those who belong, and those whom we see as not belonging. Sometimes the division is as simple as the Costco or Sam’s Club approach to shopping: if you are a dues-paying member you can buy your products here, possibly saving money in the process. American Express used to remind people that “membership has its privileges”. If you belong, you are entitled to those privileges; if you don’t belong—well, that’s too bad.

We can accept—or at the very least, we can understand—this kind of division among peoples. On the other hand, we have examples of divisions that are based on all the wrong kind of criteria. The US history of racial segregation divided people based on their skin colour. Schools, stores, even buses were designed to keep the blacks apart from the whites. We are painfully aware of the Nazi idea of the master race, and the atrocities that were committed to keep that race separate and above all others. When I was doing a crossword puzzle the other day, the clue was about a tribe involved in ethnic warfare, and the answer pointed to the Rwanda genocide and the struggle between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Wars like this continue today. In spite of the propaganda designed to hold us up as an inclusive society, we may be more exclusive today than we have every been.

Even though the realities of prejudice and superiority exist in our world, we would not expect to find such an attitude in the church. We hear St. Paul tell us: **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** (Galatians 3:28, ESV) Faith in Christ, but not necessarily our service in Christ, transcends ethnic, social and biblical gender distinctions. Faith does not separate or differentiate. It brings us together as one body, one family in Christ. Paul also reminds us that **“[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”** (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV) God wants His family of faith to include all people of **“every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”**. (Revelation 7:9, ESV)

That is why the words of our text seem so strange, because our text describes a counsel held in Jerusalem to deal with Peter’s actions in preaching to, eating with, and baptizing Gentiles—namely, Cornelius and his family. Throughout the debate we are reminded that God’s grace extends even to those people whom we don’t think belong in the church. Those who are not part of the church—or should we say especially those who are not part of the church—need to hear the saving message of the gospel. They need to know that Christ died for them, too.

In these Easter days, as we rejoice in the gift of our salvation, it is important that we remember that the Good News of the crucified and resurrected Christ is to be proclaimed to all people. It is not just a message for Lutherans or for North Americans, or for Caucasians. It is not just for the rich, even as it is not just for the poor. It is not even designed only for the people that

we think deserve to hear it. It is for all people, including people we may think don't belong, so that they, too, may have the life that Christ died to bring to all who believe.

Before His ascension, Jesus told the disciples: ***“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”*** (Luke 24:46–47, ESV) But it took a while for the early Jewish Christians to realize that this also meant they were to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. Even in the verse immediately after our text we read: ***“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.”*** (Acts 11:19, ESV) The Jews always recognized two very distinct groups of people: the chosen people, descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and “the others”, whom they referred to as the goyim or Gentiles. Belonging to the chosen people brought the promise of our Epistle lesson today: ***“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”*** (Revelation 21:3, ESV) While there was a way for Gentiles to become Jews and therefore be part of the nation of Israel, if they stayed as Gentiles they just didn't belong. God had told his people that they were to be a light to the nations, but He also warned them to be separate from the nations so that they would not be corrupted by the idolatry and wickedness of the nations around them. God gave His people His law—and it was that law given to them through Moses that defined their uniqueness and which kept them separate.

That is why Peter's visit to the home of Cornelius likely would not have happened if it had not been for the direct intervention of God. Our text tells us of Peter's vision of the unclean animals and the invitation to ***kill and eat***. When Peter answers, ***‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’*** ***But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’***

When Peter did go to the home of Cornelius, he openly states: ***“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”*** (Acts 10:28, ESV) God had to go to great lengths to teach Peter that it was not ancestry traced to Abraham, nor dedication to the law of Moses, that made one part of the chosen people. It was faith. God helped Peter to see that we cannot call unclean what God calls clean. But it was this understanding of clean and unclean that upset some of the members of the early church. For Peter to eat with a Gentile was considered unclean. How could any God-fearing Jew do such a thing? How could any disciple of Christ do something so improper? It was hard for many of the Jewish Christians to see God's grace apart from the observance of the law. It wasn't necessarily that they didn't want to other people to be saved; they just felt that those others should first become Jewish and if they were Jewish then they could minister to them in the name of Christ.

Does that same attitude manifest itself in the church today? Do we think that there are certain criteria that must be met before we can share the good news with someone? Several years ago we had a funeral here where those who attended looked like they would be more comfortable at a Hell's Angels biker rally than in a church. If this had happened on a Sunday morning, I wonder if there would be those who would have thought, “you don't belong here!” But they need the Word—and praise be to God, they heard His Word! Yes, it is for them, too. When it comes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, no one is to be excluded.

In our epistle lesson this morning John sets before us a glimpse of our glorious heavenly home. It is a comfort to know that God has prepared this wonderful, eternal home for us. But all too often we forget that we deserve the punishment of hell because we are sinners. If it were not for the grace of God, and for the gift of faith that clings to Christ, hell would be our eternal home. Thankfully, we have the hope of heaven because Jesus died to take away our sins. We look forward to heaven because our Saviour rose and has gone to prepare that home for us. And yet not everyone is going to spend eternity in heaven. Heaven's glory is given only to those who believe in Christ. All those who do not believe—whether or not they are well intentioned, whether or not they do good things, whether or not they believe in a higher power, will have to stand before the Righteous Lord of heaven and earth, who will say to them: ***“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”*** (Matthew 7:23, ESV)

If this were the fate facing a friend or a member of your family, what would you do to prevent this from happening? Do we feel that same concern for other people, for those who don't know Christ and His mercy and love? The truth is that there are countless people dying in sin and unbelief. There are so many who are starving for the Gospel. Sometimes the church is so busy worrying about itself that it fails to get around to taking the Gospel to those who need it the most—to the people who don't know the forgiving power of the cross, or the glorious life that comes through the empty tomb. What is even worse is that we can think that we don't want to take that good news to them, because they don't belong.

Peter came to understand the Gospel wasn't only for the Jews, but for the Gentiles, too! God, in His mercy gave His Son to save all people. John declares: ***“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole***

world.” (1 John 2:2, ESV) No one is to be excluded; no one is to be ignored or forgotten. An old gospel hymn says, *Everybody needs the Lord*. That is so true, and it is our privilege and responsibility as those who believe in Christ and live in Him to share Him—yes, with those people, too—so that everyone may belong to His family through faith. Amen.