

Breaking Down Barriers

Acts 11:1-18

January 31, 2021

As I was reading our text for today, I thought about the words from one of the books I used to read to my boys when they were young, which was a long time ago! Still, I thought about it after reading today's passage. The following excerpt is from Dr. Seuss' Green Eggs and Ham:

"I will not eat them in a boat, I will not eat them with a goat, I will not eat them here or there, I will not eat them anywhere...I do not like them, Sam-I-Am."

He had something in common with Peter. Dr. Seuss's comical poem is about his refusal to eat an unfamiliar and unsavory dish. Peter's refusal to eat the foods lowered down to him on a kind of heavenly picnic blanket may strike us as ridiculous and somewhat silly by today's standards. But for Peter and the religious leaders he told about this strange vision, it was no laughing matter.

The whole episode threw Peter into a state of consternation. This episode is, in fact, a pivotal event in the book of Acts, an event that would finally determine the identity and character of the church.

The book of Acts is written by Luke -- who himself was a Gentile. The book tells the history of the early Christian church. One clue to the importance of this story is its length: Luke devotes almost two chapters to Peter's story. It involves a trance, a vision, the Spirit and an angel!

Clearly something is going on that is breaking new ground in the history of the people of God. For Peter, the vision is disturbing and unsettling. His response to the animals on the sheet goes way beyond the aversion factor that most of us would associate with eating geckos, buzzards, and mice. The sheet full of creatures was an affront to Peter's piety, not just his taste buds, for he thought it was God who had told the people of Israel to make a distinction between "clean" and "unclean" animals.

The distinctions were spelled out for them quite clearly in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Making these distinctions was part of what solidified the Jewish people and reinforced their identity all throughout the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, and all the pressures under the Roman occupation to assimilate to the pagan world.

The command to "kill and eat" was not just a challenge to some arbitrary man-made boundaries—these were boundaries that everyone knew had been set by God. It was something the Israelites could count on from the past, and was part of Peter's core beliefs since childhood.

How could God simply overturn the clear commandments of the Scriptures? Peter wondered. Could God's mind change? The Holy Spirit was about to lead Peter to a new way of thinking and living. It took an army to change Peter's mind. What would it take for us?

Here is how it happened: One day a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel, had a vision in which an angel told him to send some of his men to Joppa to find Peter.

The next day, Peter, while waiting for his lunch to be prepared, took a long afternoon nap, and had a strange and riveting vision. As the vision faded and he sat there wondering what to make of it, three men showed up and asked Peter to go with them to Cornelius's house. How strange!

Now Cornelius, who lived in Caesarea, was a centurion, a military man in charge of what is called the Italian cohort. That means he was pretty important, and had a lot of people under his command. Oh yes, and Cornelius was a Gentile. Luke tells us he was devout and feared God, but he was not a Jew.

At just about the time Simon Peter had his dream, Cornelius was having one too. Peter was told in his dream to look up Cornelius, and Cornelius was told in his dream to send his emissaries to Simon Peter, and invite him to come to his house. God was at work here!

Peter was in for quite a surprise, because Cornelius had invited all his relatives—so Peter not only had to enter a Gentile's house, but also had to interact with this Gentile's whole family, and undoubtedly have dinner. Peter felt like the odd man out. What was God doing to him?

Peter -- being a little slow to catch God's drift sometimes, was finally beginning to figure out that his vision was not about food, but about people – all of God's people.

He says to Cornelius's family, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I must not call *anyone* profane or unclean." (Acts 10:28).

What a remarkable line this is. "God has shown me that I must not call *anyone* profane or unclean." Peter then tells this household the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection, and about the forgiveness of sins available to anyone who believes in him. Before he can even finish speaking, the Holy Spirit falls on everyone there, so there is nothing else for the reluctant Peter to do but to baptize every last one of them.

The Christian movement was now well on its way to breaking beyond the boundaries of Judaism, and the small band of faithful believers were about to embark on an adventure to share their faith with all the known world.

How remarkable and groundbreaking this was. Peter had a lot of explaining to do when he got back to Jerusalem. He told the Christians there all about his vision and the ensuing events and the conclusion he had drawn from this whole bewildering episode: "The Spirit told me...not to make a distinction between them and us...and who was I that I should hinder God?"

At the end of his story, his critics were silenced. What could they say? Finally, they all agreed: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

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It is hard for us to appreciate how earth shaking this realization was. It was a recognition of God's relationship to *all* of humanity. God was now bringing the Good News and grace to "other" people – all people --especially ones who were different from Peter and his brethren. The Spirit told Peter not to discriminate between the people of God, for both the Jews and the Gentiles were welcome in the kingdom of God.

God's house is big enough to accommodate everyone. Twenty centuries later, we take our heritage as the people of God somewhat for granted, but most of us Protestants were Gentiles, and at one time not welcome to the faith. We are the beneficiaries of Peter's openness to God's strange new initiative toward the Gentiles.

We live in a world that constantly makes distinctions, though we may not use the categories "clean" and "unclean." We talk about black and white; rich and poor; left and right; blue states and red states; gay and straight; U.S. citizens and the undocumented. We build walls. We erect fences. We close our minds, and wonder why others can't be more like us.

The thing is, God shows no partiality, and God's grace and forgiveness is open to all. God was doing a new thing. God *is* doing a new thing. What other walls and fences do we build? Is that really the way we want to live? Is that the way God wants us to be?

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I'd like to end with a story about how a priest overcame some boundaries and barriers in his own life, and drew a wider, more inclusive circle of God's grace and love for all people. It might be instructive for us today.

In Normandy during WW II, there were two GIs who lost a dear comrade in combat. They took their friend to be buried in a cemetery. They went to the church and asked the Roman Catholic priest for permission to bury him inside the confines of the cemetery, but the priest said, "Well, the rule is that you've got to be Roman Catholic, and you've got to be a member of the parish in order to be buried here. I just can't allow it. I wish I could, but I can't."

The men persisted, and they begged the priest. They said, "Please, it would mean so much to us to bury our friend inside the fence." "I'm so sorry," the priest said. "I just can't allow it, but I tell you what I'll do. You can bury him *outside* the fence. Just not inside."

The two GIs reluctantly dug the grave, said a prayer, and buried their comrade. The next day they went back to put a grave marker in the ground by their fallen friend. They walked up and down. They looked where the grave had been dug, and there was no grave to be found. Did someone move the body and not tell them? They were heartbroken.

They went in to see the priest and said, "Father, forgive us. We were the ones who came yesterday and asked if we could bury our friend." "Oh, yes. I remember," the priest said. "You told us to bury him outside and we did, but now we can't find him. Can you tell us what happened?"

"Oh, yes," the priest replied. I know what happened. I was so upset at myself about what I said that I spent most of the night moving the fence. Your friend is now buried *inside* the cemetery."

What fences is God calling you to move or mend? What walls need to come down for churches, our country, ourselves? It is hard work, and sometimes our resistance is great; but the benefit can be of no doubt. Where is God pushing you beyond your comfort zone? Where is resistance being met? In the end, it's not about boundaries, but about God's boundless love and grace for the Gentiles, which are exactly people like you and me. Amen.

Acts 11:1-18

11:1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God.

11:2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him,

11:3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

11:4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,

11:5 "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.

11:6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.

11:7 I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'

11:8 But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

11:9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

11:10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

11:11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were.

11:12 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.

11:13 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;

11:14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'

11:15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.

11:16 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.'

11:17 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?"

11:18 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."