

Fifth Sunday after Easter May 15 2022

Acts 11:1-18

I'm going to practice here a bit of what I suggest we do whenever we encounter something that might be charged with some emotion, particularly in how it's presented. For example, in our reading from Acts, we might be making some judgments about the circumcised believers and their attitude towards the uncircumcised- the Gentiles. We might wonder about this desire to keep distance between the two groups. In our modern ears, it doesn't sound or feel right. How could they be so judgmental!

Professor Karl Kuhn who teaches at Lakeland College in Sheboygan, WI does a good job of summarizing what is going on. Peter and his group stayed with these Gentiles in Caesarea for several days. This crossed "long-established boundaries deemed fundamental to the vocation of God's people, Israel." The "purity norms" included distancing themselves from non-Jews (Gentiles) and "reinforced for Israelites their identity as a people set apart to serve God, to honor God's Torah, and to receive God's deliverance." These norms "reflected essential elements of their worldview that defined their role and place as the people of God." It helped them maintain their right relationship with God. It was part of being faithful to God.

So, they were challenging Peter as a fellow believer who had gone astray, "Hey man! Why are you actually staying with those Gentiles? Because they can affect how you can fulfill your own faithfulness to God."

More context. This question of circumcision- essentially of whether you had to become a Jew to be a follower of Jesus- is one of the main challenges to the early church and this isn't the only place you find it appearing in Acts. In fact, historian Derek Cooper believes this was the defining question of the first century of the Christian church. So, what we see here is part of the origin of that conflict, one that will eventually (in another 4 chapters or so) include the ministry of Paul as well as Peter.

We see in this text part of the process of finding an answer to one of the deep and meaningful questions of the early church. And it seems to work the way it should, right? The circumcised believers fulfill their duty and obligation as fellow believers to make sure Peter isn't going off the rails by questioning him closely about what went on in Caesarea. Peter responds by giving a clear, step-by-step account of his actions and thinking. This includes the fact that he repeatedly rejected this vision of God's call to do that which was contrary to the Covenant with God, to eat unclean food. However, when Peter follows the command of God, to go to Caesarea, he finds that God through the Holy Spirit does in these Gentiles the same thing God has done in them. So, Peter says, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" After listening carefully to this evidence his interrogators are silenced, pondering what this might mean, before finally praising God and saying, "God has given even to Gentiles the repentance/ the change of thought that leads to life."

It all seems so... perfect. Reasonable. Neat.

But is this really how it went? The Rev. Dr Eric Barreto, professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary has studied Acts and he argues that the book of Acts is not a how to guide for the church. Rather, he reminds us that it is a narrative. Filled with stories that are meant to delight, to entertain, to inform us and shape us (Yes!), but also to spark our imagination together. To see, imagine, the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, active in around us even today. In 2022.

So, I wonder if the reality was that those conversations between Peter and the circumcised believers was a bit more heated. If they didn't (even just a bit) jump down his throat when he got home. If Peter didn't get just a wee bit defensive in the face of that attack. If they gave a more grudging response, "Well look at that, God has given even Gentiles this change of thinking that brings life."

I mean, that seems to be more how it works in our own church and our own lives, right? We are human after all, and our emotions do cloud our judgment. We dislike change and new ways of thinking. We defend that which we have built our life on to the bitter end. We get defensive when we or our beliefs are attacked, even for good reason. We are imperfect.

The way it is written, it doesn't seem quite real, and this is one of the biggest issues surrounding the early church, did you have to become a Jew to be a follower of Jesus. Where is the passion that must have existed?

Is that how the church is today about the big issues of our time? The United Methodist Church is splitting over issues surrounding homosexuality, especially the ordination of those in committed same sex unions. The church universal in the United States is struggling again with questions surrounding abortion, human sexuality, and bodily autonomy, when war is justified and how best to pursue peace, how we keep our faith and our citizenship in their proper places, and all of these questions can bring out the worst in us. We shout at one another and refuse to really listen. We come in not with open minds, but closed ones that can give us a false sense of certainty that we are doing the will of God! In short, we as followers of Jesus can be just as inclined to arguing past one another as anyone else.

Except. We do have this nearly perfect story set before us. And I wonder, if this idealized version of how the church might live out Christ's command to love one another even when we are dealing with difficult issues, if this version is not meant to be what we aspire to? If this might not be the yardstick against which we check ourselves. If the author of Acts invites us to use our imagination to see how we might live out this story in our lives of faith.

The circumcised believers give thanks to God that God has changed the thinking of the Gentiles. But I also wonder if they don't realize that God has changed their thinking as well. That the need for repentance, which remember literally means to change your thinking, is one that we all need. Continually. It is, after all, the core of Jesus' proclamation in the gospel of Mark, "Repent and believe in the good news!"

Which do you imagine is more like the reign of God that we pray would come in the Lord's prayer? A world of division among the Body of Christ? A world of parties, where we claim our truth and plug our ears to the possibility that God might indeed do a new thing? A world of tribalism where we cannot imagine God even cares about much less blesses anyone else.

Or a world where all that we do is grounded in the love of God in Jesus Christ that we show to one another, even when we disagree? Where we are in the habit of speaking truth in love to one another- asking questions, giving responses, listening to those responses, and then sitting with them in silence. Actually pondering whether this might be God doing a new thing. Because isn't God always doing a new thing?

The sun rises in the same way, but not in the same place. Our bodies are the same- maybe a bit older, slower, for those you are younger a bit stronger, taller- yet the lining of our stomachs are refreshed every few days, our bones once a decade. Even when things look the same, God is doing a new thing.

I am tired of the bombast and simple thinking. The spiteful, venomous, and sometimes hateful things that come out of our mouths. To be clear, to say and do such things means we are not following Jesus at that moment. No matter how much we might wish it so. In fact, doing so dishonors the name of Christ that we bear and shames us.

Let us turn from such things. Let us confess where we have done so and turn again to the grace of Christ- who will always receive us with open arms, a wide smile, and warm embrace.

If we must face the sometimes harsh realities of this world, have the difficult conversations, make the imperfect decisions, let us at least do so with grace for one another, with loving truth spoken, heard, and pondered. With an ear listening always for how we might be called to change our thinking, so that we might catch up with the new thing God's Holy Spirit is doing.

And in doing this, we experience the joy of the life-giving love of Jesus. We catch a glimpse of the reign of God on earth. And it is truly better than anything we humans can produce. I'll take that life any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

Can we imagine that the Risen Christ, active in the Holy Spirit, is among us even now? Can we imagine that the love of God in Jesus Christ might be calling us to cross boundaries that have helped us define what being faithful to God means? Can we repent, change our thinking, and believe in the Good News of God's unbounded love for us and the world in Jesus Christ. With the help of the Holy Spirit, with the grace and love of Christ, with a little bit of imagination... we can. And what an amazing world that is.

Thanks be to God.