

An Unexpected Change of Menu

May 19, 2019

Scripture: Acts 11: 1-18

¹ Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 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. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.' 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?"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."



If you have your Bible with you, in just a moment I invite you turn to Acts 11: 1-18. First, let us pray...

Easter was just four Sundays ago. Usually when we gather at a holiday, food and family are central. Can you remember that long ago – all the way back to Easter? Well, just in case you cannot, a few questions to jog your memories. Where were you for the big Easter meal? Who was there? What did you eat? Is this past Easter becoming clearer in your mind? If you are like me, food is central in our celebrations and in our memories. Because I know you are curious, for the Britt family, Kristin, Abby, and I gathered with my mom and dad and our middle son Samuel. Dinner was ham, candied yams, roasted brussel sprouts, green bean casserole, hot cross buns, and, later of course, strawberries and angel food cake with a little lemon curd. This menu might be pretty similar to some of yours. For us, Easter always means ham, yams, some type of bread, and green bean casserole. Is it the same meal each Easter for your family? Well, what if next year we sat down and it was completely different – SURPRISE!

At the time that Peter lived, the diet of the common Israelite family was pretty basic. Bread was eaten at every meal – usually from barley ground by the women of the house. The main sources of protein were lentils or beans and cheese made from goat or sheep's milk. Milk spoiled quickly, so it was

commonly made into cheese. Most families would eat fish regularly. Meat was a rare treat and when served it was lamb or goat. Spices such as cumin and coriander were used to flavor the food. Fruit and nuts were also a large part of the diet. Fresh figs and melons were common, but they also ate cucumbers and dried pomegranate and dates. They drank wine and water and also curdled milk, which was a lot like yogurt. Olive oil was used for cooking. Sugar did not exist. Wealthy families had access to honey, but it was used sparingly. The variety of foods available in the region would have been larger, but what was acceptable to eat was limited by the Jewish dietary laws. For example, wildlife and shellfish were plentiful but were forbidden by the dietary laws. Only animals with a cloven hoof that chewed the cud were kosher. Only sea creatures with fins and scales were kosher. All birds and reptiles were forbidden.

For Peter and for all good Jewish Christians, food was a part of their faith. Following all of the dietary laws equated to faithfulness to God and to God's commands. The table also mattered. There was a saying in Peter's day that basically said, "*You are whom you eat with*". Jewish people ate separate from Gentiles and other sinners. To illustrate why this was, I want to share a passage from a commentary.

It is said that when asked why God created so many Gentiles, a prominent rabbi replied, "So there might be fuel enough for the fires of hell." It was unlawful for a Jew to help a Gentile who was giving birth, thus helping to bring another Gentile into the world. If a Jew married a Gentile, the Jewish family had a funeral service for them and the one who married a Gentile was dead to them. For Gentiles, the feeling was mutual; they despised Jews.

This deep dislike kept the two cultures largely separate. The fact that Peter went to a Gentile's home is one of the core issues in our passage today. So, when Peter returns to Jerusalem, the first question they ask him was, "*Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them*"? In sitting down and eating with Cornelius and his family, Peter was breaking two cardinal rules. In the eyes of the circumcised believers, the Jewish Christians, Peter was being culturally and spiritually polluted. The news of it was causing quite a stir back in Jerusalem. Immediately Peter understands the gravity of the situation and the question. As our passage unfolds we see Peter carefully explaining each step so that all can see how God was orchestrating the whole thing. New ground has been broken. Peter knows that he must tread very carefully.

Peter begins by stating that he was praying - seeking communion with God. Then, while in prayer, in a trance he saw a vision. Peter saw a large sheet coming down out of heaven with all sorts of animals on it – "*four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air*". Then God directed him, saying, "*Get up, Peter; kill and eat*". Peter is taken aback by this command. It would be like having green eggs and ham for Easter dinner. Peter protests, saying, "*By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth*". Do you understand what Peter is saying here? No Lord – I have never broken the dietary laws and I am not about to start now. No, no, no! I will not touch those green eggs and ham. For Peter, the contents of the sheet equal sin - like lying, adultery, or murder. All of these sins would be life-changing. Peter is not initially willing to go there; he is not willing to eat the unclean animals.

As always, God is patient. He replies, *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane"*. God is saying, 'I made it, you can eat it'. The argument goes back and forth three times. Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no. And then the sheet is pulled



back up into heaven. At that moment three men arrive, and the Spirit tells Peter to go with them. The Spirit tells Peter not to *"make a distinction between them and us"*. And then to add validity to the story he is telling,

Peter points to the six brothers standing there and says they were with him too. Witnesses.

Once Peter and company arrive from Joppa, Cornelius, the Roman centurion who had sent for Peter, shares the angelic visit he had. Yes, you heard it correctly – not only a Gentile but a Roman soldier. Cornelius shares that the angel instructed him to send for Peter so that he could preach a *"message by which you and your entire household will be saved"*. Make sure you catch what happens next. Reading from verse 15: *"As I began to speak..."* The Holy Spirit does not even wait for Peter to get done with his sermon. Just as he is starting to preach, *"the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning"*. And then what was Peter to do but to baptize Cornelius and his whole household? He figured if God saw it fit to give these Gentiles the same Holy Spirit that they had received when they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was he to keep them from being baptized. Those who had questioned Peter were silenced. Then they praised God and said, *"Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life"*. They praised God because the mission field had been expanded. The menu now included not just Jews, but

Gentiles as well. The Jews were no longer the only chosen people. God was now including the non-Jews as well. This message applies to us and our world as well – *"God has given the repentance that leads to life"* to all people.

Due to the unexpected change of menu in today's passage, there are three surprising fillings that occur. First, Peter and the other Jewish Christians are now able to fill themselves with foods that were previously off-limits. There is a certain logic to this. If God created it, how can it be unclean? Yes, there were preparation and other health safety concerns, but if handled properly, all plants and animals were edible. The second filling came with crossing boundaries. God led Peter to fulfill an invitation to non-Jewish home. The mission field was now the world. The disciples could go to both Jews and Gentiles with the good news of Jesus Christ. The third surprise filling had to do with the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit fell upon and filled the Gentiles. The normal process had been changed. Step one followed by step two followed by step three followed by step four no longer necessarily applied. Normally one would encounter the good news, would get to know this Jesus, would decide to follow Him, professing faith in Christ alone, would then be baptized, and THEN be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This was a whole new ballgame with new rules. It was a real game-changer.

The vision and the ensuing encounter with Cornelius and his household forced Peter and rest of the leaders of the early church to wrestle with a tough question: If entering hearts of the Gentiles was enough for Holy Spirit, who were the apostles to say that they are unclean or unworthy? Their idea of who was acceptable to bring into the family of God was exploding right before their eyes.

The question for us is similar: Who out there have we assumed is off God's menu? Who out there have we wanted to limit access to or even to prevent from becoming a part of the family of God?

There's a story about two rabbis in the Talmud, the body of civil and ceremonial Jewish law, that illustrates how this can be a struggle. The two rabbis were named Hillel and Shammai. Hillel was patient and understanding, and more conceptual than his counterpart. Shammai was an engineer or mathematician in his mindset. According to the story, a Gentile went to Shammai and said he would convert to Judaism if Shammai would teach him the entire Torah while the Gentile stood on one foot. This was a metaphor for a very brief period of time. Shammai hurriedly pushed him out the door with the ruler in his hand. The Gentile then went to Hillel, who converted him by saying, *"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn."*

I think a man named Jesus had a similar saying. In John 13, verses 34 and 35, Jesus says this to His disciples: *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"*. This idea of loving as Jesus loved is at the core of the Christian faith. It is the heart of stories such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

In our passage today, Peter and the early church leaders learned two very important things. The first is that all people are worthy of the good news of Jesus Christ. All people – everyone is welcome in the circle of faith. Second, it is the Holy Spirit that transforms people into believers. Once a person hears the good news and accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, it is the power of God alone that transforms people into new creations.

Peter experienced these two truths in Acts 11, verses 1-18. He went where God led and he preached the good news. Then the Holy Spirit went to work and transformed Cornelius and his whole household into believers. To whom are we being called? To whom am I being called? To whom are you being called? All the world is our parish as well. That includes Winner and Colome and everywhere else that you and I live and love this week. May we take the good news of Jesus Christ into the world this week, empowered by the Holy Spirit, seeking to help transform our communities one believer at a time. May it be so. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. What traditions or 'rules' of faith might God be challenging in you as you consider who might be worthy of the good news of Jesus Christ?
- 2) Pray. What 'Gentile' comes to mind when you think of the non-believers you know? Pray for the Holy Spirit to lead you to share faith with them.
- 3) Serve. What act of service could you offer this week to help the Holy Spirit to bring transformation in someone's life?