

Easter 6, Yr. B
May 6, 2018
Acts 10:44-48

The letter from John and the section of John's Gospel are both continuations of what we heard last week, about the centrality and necessity of love. But I'd like to focus this morning on the reading from Acts, which when you hear the whole thing, is about putting love into action. This morning's reading is just a snippet from chapter 10. The full story takes up the entire chapter and, in addition to putting some flesh on the concept of "love" it's also a story about a watershed time in the early church. And what I'd like us to keep in mind as we hear the story are the issues that we still wrestle with today: outsiders (who's in and who's out), how one reads Scripture, who has authority and where does it come from, is it possible for the tradition to change and what's the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this?

The story begins with a Roman centurion named Cornelius. He's stationed in Caesarea. Cornelius was a Gentile, but the text says that he was devout and generous and that he was a God-fearer. God-fearers were people who were attracted to the Jewish faith, who probably attended synagogue services, who believed in the idea of monotheism and approved of the Jewish view of ethics, but who were not Jews – they hadn't been circumcised and more importantly for this story, they didn't observe the kosher food laws. Now, while that sounds to us like a really minor problem, it was actually a very MAJOR one. For centuries Jews had observed these laws; it was a central part of their identity. And the book of Leviticus was pretty clear about what they could and couldn't eat. Certain things were unclean, including shellfish, birds, reptiles, and pigs. The food laws meant that Jews and Gentiles simply couldn't eat together, because Gentiles would be eating unclean foods. More important, though, was the fact that a strict Jew would find Gentiles themselves to be unclean. They would have thought that God himself had no use for Gentiles.

So that's the setting of the story.

The chapter begins with an angel visiting Cornelius, who told him to send men to Peter, who was in Joppa at the time. So Cornelius did. Luke tells us that as Cornelius' men were approaching the city, Peter was praying, and while he didn't see an angel, Peter had a vision of his own. He saw a sheet being lowered by its four corners; in the sheet were all kinds of creatures who were alike only in that they all fell into the forbidden foods category. While he was watching this, Peter heard a voice telling him to get up, kill and eat. Peter refused, saying basically, "No way...I've never eaten

anything unclean in my life and I don't intend to start now." But the response was – "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean." This happened three times. You can imagine that it left Peter not only hungry, but puzzled. What was that all about?

While Peter is still trying to figure out what had just happened, the men from Cornelius arrive at his door. The text says that Peter heard the Spirit say, "Look, those men are looking for you; go with them without hesitation for I have sent them." So Peter invites them in (a big deal, you should notice and this threshold crossing is a metaphor for later boundary crossing) and the next day they all set out for Cornelius' house. The entourage also includes six Jewish Christians that Peter asks to come along. Peter is undoubtedly still trying to figure out what this all means.

Cornelius is expecting them and meets them at the threshold, probably because he's not sure if Peter would be willing to enter his house. But, he does (here is that threshold crossing again.) But when Peter gets inside he doesn't start well. He says, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile..." but then he goes on, "BUT," he says – and as one commentator says, what a powerful word that is because the inclusion of Gentiles in the church hinges on his use of that word – it's a word that says that things can change, that perhaps we don't always know everything, that God can still teach us. "BUT," Peter says, and then he described his vision. And by this time he's connected the dots – the clean/unclean stuff and the voice telling him that what God has made clean, he should never declare unclean. When Cornelius tells his part of the story, Peter tells them the Christian message and one of the things he says is that he has come to understand that God doesn't show partiality – God has no favorites. And the text says that while Peter was still speaking, as if he would emphasize Peter's words, the Holy Spirit came upon this assembled group of Gentiles in the same way it had come upon the disciples at Pentecost. And just as the eunuch had said to Philip – is there anything to keep me from being baptized? Here Peter takes the initiative and says something to the effect that the Holy Spirit seems to have put the cart before the horse and there was nothing to keep these Gentiles from being baptized. It's a bit like Philip and the Ethiopian we heard about last week. And Peter does what Philip did, and baptizes Cornelius and his household – although this is a step further than that taken by Philip, because these are Gentiles!

Peter receives them without any kind of institutional authorization; he didn't check with the others in Jerusalem, he didn't quote Scripture; he simply trusted this revelation he had received from God and his belief that Jesus was Lord of all, not just of some. But it's not too surprising to note

that he gets called on the carpet by the Jerusalem contingent – you sold out; you crossed the line, you disobeyed the law, they tell him. But Peter tells them what happened and says, in another powerful insight, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us...who was I that I should hinder God? You’ll remember that Peter had taken six other Jewish Christians with him and they witnessed the same thing. So, at this later conversation in Jerusalem, they were able to verify what Peter was saying. All the parties probably would have been aware that Egyptian law required seven people as witnesses to decide a case and Roman law required seven seals to authenticate important documents. In this case, the seven were there. And the Jerusalem church agreed to allow Gentiles entrance.

Peter’s insight, this new and courageous perception, this willingness to re-think the tradition, to cross lines previously seen as uncrossable, all this meant that you and I would be included in the Christian Church. There are a couple of other things that we should notice. First of all, although it took a while before the early church was comfortable with the whole question about Gentile acceptance, eventually it was decided that Gentiles COULD become Christian and they could do so without becoming Jews first. In other words, they could retain their identity as Gentiles; they were different, but they could still be included. Differences remained but they were transcended by the fact that all these people, whatever their differences, were seeking God. In fact, when Peter is speaking to the Gentiles in this passage, part of his message is that he has come to understand that God shows no partiality and that all who believe in Jesus will be saved.

But there’s a lot more here than that. First of all, I think this text calls us to look at the nature of boundaries. They’re all over the place. Some are helpful, like the rope that divides the deep end of a swimming pool from the shallow end. But more often they’re negative – the railroad tracks that decide who’s on the right side and who’s on the wrong side; or all those Division Streets across the country that divided cities and town racially, all the boundaries of race, or sex, or ethnicity, or class or age, or nationalism or, sadly, religion. How do we hold those up against Peter’s understanding that God has no favorites?

In our time, there’s a lot of talk and angst about identity. We ARE different from one another. Psychologists tell us that we define ourselves both positively, I am this, or that, but also over and against others: I’m not that. Rabbi Sacks, in his book about religion and violence, points out that what we suffer from is what he calls our groupishness – but that at some time in our past, and even now perhaps, being in the group was essential for life. So, identity and group-belonging, yes. But the Biblical message is that

that doesn't mean enmity. We can be different and still respect each other. We can be different and transcend those differences finding commonality in the kind of love and connection that comes with loving God and from seeing the world from God's perspective.

Exclusion is part of everyone's experience I think, and we can learn from it. I have two stories of my own. The first one is about celebrating one of my first Eucharists in a church in Wisconsin that I had attended during seminary. The rector told me that before the event, one woman had asked him whether it would be a sin to accept communion from a woman priest. The challenge of inclusion and change. The second is when I was in seminary in Dallas and was doing CPE at Parkland Hospital. They had a section that provided essential stuff for people who may have come in on an emergency basis or who were simply poor. It was run by an Episcopal woman. One day I went to get something for someone on one of the floors I was responsible for and she and I had a conversation during which she wanted to know my background, etc. When I told her I was born and raised as a Roman Catholic, she looked at me, shook her head and said, "My goodness, they are letting EVERYONE in these days." And for that I'm eternally grateful!

One final thought. The real hero, the moving force in this story is the Holy Spirit. We are called to be open to that spirit, open to change, but we can abide, rest, be confident in knowing that God's in charge. And here's a very early birthday gift I received which a constant reminder of that. Because God's in charge, we can indeed keep calm and carry on. Amen.