

May 19, 2019  
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Acts 11:1-18      The Unexpected Acts of God: Unexpected Change of Menu  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Acts 11:1-18      New Revised Standard Version

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

Have you ever been to a big party? It may have been a graduation or a wedding, Thanksgiving or Christmas. I want you to imagine it for a minute with me. Imagine the scene, the faces that are gathered around the table. Is it friends? Family? What are you eating? Parties usually revolve around food, and our memories are often more of flavors and smells than they are of conversations. For me it is my grandfather’s mashed potatoes. He would say that the secret was to beat the hell out of them. Or Aunt Alice’s green jello salad. I’m not sure why it was called a salad because there was nothing healthy inside! My mom’s pumpkin pies or Uncle Mike’s deep-fried turkey.

Now, imagine that someone changed the menu. You arrive at the party expecting turkey and dressing or wedding cake or your favorite lasagna or apple pie and surprise – you find something completely different on your plate. Would you be startled? Disappointed? Upset?<sup>1</sup>

In our scripture today, Peter is paying close attention to the menu in a way that goes beyond tradition or expectation. For him, the menu is a matter of faithfulness to God and God’s laws. To eat the thing lowered on the sheet in his dream would mean more than just a change in menu. Peter understood it to be as much a sin as lying or adultery or murder. For Peter to come to terms with these menu changes, enough to tell the believers of Judea that the items on the sheet are clean and acceptable to eat, is life changing. He has been told by a voice from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This was an amazing announcement.

We have a saying, “You are what you eat.” In Peter’s day, the saying that people would have found more important to say was, “You are whom you eat with.” Jews did not eat with non Jews, those called Gentiles. Just like Dallas people do not eat with Houston people. People in East Dallas do not eat with people in Plano. Red sox fans do not eat with Yankees fans. You did not eat with those people. You did not accept their hospitality, and if you did you would become culturally and spiritually polluted. But, the menu has changed and so have the table companions. This radical change is causing quite a stir among the Jewish followers of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> LaGrone, Jessica. “Easter Series: Surprise!” A Preacher’s Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. Pg. 210.

There are three really surprising things about this story. Peter receives orders to fill himself with all kinds of foods he has previously thought off limits. Then Peter receives an equally surprising order to respond to this invitation to go to the house of non-Jews. Lastly, Peter's new Gentile friends are filled with the Spirit of God. Peter's critics believed you had to follow Jewish law to follow Jesus, but Peter's story convinced them otherwise. The Holy Spirit entered hearts of people that Peter had thought were unclean or unworthy. If the Holy Spirit said yes to these people, how could Peter say no?

Here is the shocking truth of the Good News of Jesus. God's menu of grace and love is available to all. There are some people that we have assumed are not welcome to God's menu, but we are wrong. God says everyone come.<sup>2</sup> Jesus shared his message of transformative love and grace with everyone. I remember having a conversation with a family member about who was going to go to heaven. My family member had a definite idea about who were God's chosen, and I just kept saying, "I think God is bigger than that." God is bigger than our pre-set ideas of who is in and who is out. God is bigger than our prejudices and our stereotypes. We don't need to distinguish between them and us.

The leaders in Jerusalem listened to Peter and heard about this new reality that he envisioned. They could have said, "You are out of your mind, and this is wrong!" Instead, the Holy Spirit helped them listen and change. A change of heart comes when we see the Holy Spirit at work in the stories of strangers, recognizing in them the same Spirit that is working in our own lives. It is hard to hate up close.

Too often, we try to be nice at church. We try not to be confrontational. We try to sidestep controversy. We hide our differences. We paint smiles on our church faces, even as we realize irreconcilable issues. Peter's story reminds us that controversy needs to be voiced, not avoided, and conflict needs to be transformed, not ignored.<sup>3</sup>

Stories, not arguments, change lives. Peter has been called before "the apostles and the believers". He hears their criticism and responds to it with a story. It is the story, not arguments, that change people's hearts. If Peter had come to argue how they were wrong and he was right, he would not have been able to change their hearts. Arguments crystallize differences. Debates keep two sides apart. In debates and arguments, there are winners and losers. Peter could have angrily charged into the Jerusalem court and yelled, "Is it fair that we keep the gospel to ourselves? Does not God also love Gentiles? Cannot Gentiles approach God directly without first becoming like us?" Arguments would have gone on for days. A story changes hearts and lives because stories are powerful. A story invites people across the divide, making everyone the winner.<sup>4</sup> Jesus knew this because he used parables, stories, to change hardened hearts. Jesus' parables left people with questions for them to explore, rather than issues for them to debate.

Peter tells a story about God intervening in his life, speaking to him in a vision and a voice calling him to overcome his stereotypes and distinctions and see his mission in more universal terms. Peter lets the people know that this is his story, but it just as easily could have been their story. This could have happened to them. This could happen to us. What would you do, if God appeared and spoke to you in this way? Would you, could you, act differently?

I want to encourage us to tell our children, our friends, our neighbors, the stories of how we have experienced God. Tell our youth stories of how God changed our minds, redirected our paths, and opened new horizons for us. I was talking with someone from Greenland Hills last

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<sup>2</sup> LaGrone, Jessica. "Easter Series: Surprise!" A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. Pg. 210.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, Stephen. Homiletical Perspective in Acts 11:1-18 commentary in Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2. P. 453.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, Stephen. Homiletical Perspective in Acts 11:1-18 commentary in Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2. P. 453.

week and they shared with me that they felt like they were pretty open, pretty accepting of all people, but then they saw gay families worshipping God together with their kids at Greenland Hills and it hit them that these are normal families. It opened their heart to be served Communion by a same sex couple. It reminded me of the words of writer Rachel Held Evans who died tragically a few weeks ago. She said, "I thought God wanted to use me to show gay people how to be straight. Instead God used gay people to show me how to be Christian." Just think about that for a minute. And then tell your stories. Thanks be to God, Amen.