

May 15, 2022 – Acts 11:1-18

When you think about the apostles and the early church of Jerusalem, it's easy to think that there was complete unity. Without any disagreements or controversy or discord. It's easy to think of a perfect church led by perfect men doing the perfect will of God laying a perfect foundation for us today.

Now, ignoring the fact that no church – ever – has been that perfect, it turns out that's also not what the Bible tells us. In fact, in our first lesson today, we hear about the exact opposite occurring.

From what it sounds like, the church of Jerusalem was in quite an uproar, actually. Everyone who had gathered that day was angry. Peter's offense was inexcusable to them. He had gone to the unclean house of a Gentile. Ate unclean, Gentile food. Baptized an unclean, Gentile family. And welcomed this unclean, Gentile family into their holy fellowship of believers.

And they were furious. How dare he throw away the Mosaic Law like this? Sure, Jesus had spoken against the law of the Pharisees. He had criticized their self-righteous attitude. Spoken against their treatment of the poor and the sick and the outcasts among them. Condemned their corruption and abuse of power.

But he had never outright violated the Holy Scriptures. He may have reinterpreted the Sabbath Laws in a way that enraged the Pharisees, but he always observed the Sabbath. He may have spoken to Samaritans, but he never lived or ate among them. He may have visited the homes of tax collectors and prostitutes, but at least they were Jewish tax collectors and Jewish prostitutes.

So when word reached Jerusalem how Peter had flagrantly violated the Law of Moses in so many ways, the brothers were understandably incensed. They all believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They all believed he had come to change Judaism forever. But they were still Jews! And there was still a Law to observe!

And what made this all worse was that it wasn't just any Gentile that Peter had visited. It was a Roman Gentile. A Roman centurion. A commander in the Roman army.

The same Roman army that had desecrated the Temple and turned it into a Temple of Zeus. The same Roman army that had rounded up their countrymen and forced the people to watch them be used as human sacrifices. The same Roman army that had done nothing but murder their sons and rape their daughters for three centuries. The same Roman army that mocked Jesus with a crown of thorns. The same Roman army that had nailed their Lord to a cross.

And now this man, this Roman soldier, was Peter's friend. And they were supposed to simply welcome him into their company. Open their arms and greet him as a brother. Shake his unclean hands. Baptize his unclean children. And eat his unclean food.

No. They weren't going to stand for it. They had sacrificed too much trying to convince the Pharisees that they were still Jews. They had sacrificed too much trying to fight the Romans off. Peter was not going to ruin all they had worked for.

And so, the moment that Peter returns to Jerusalem, they confront him with their concerns. "You ate with Gentiles. You baptized a Roman family. A Roman centurion's family."

There was no denying it. "Yes, I did." Peter replied. "But it's not what you think. I had a vision. God came to me. He spoke to me. He showed me this... sheet. Coming down from heaven. And there were animals on it. Lots of them. Clean animals. Unclean animals. Sheep and goats. Pigs and cows. Fish and shellfish. Birds and reptiles and predators. Every animal you can imagine.

"And then God told me to kill and eat any of these. And I told God, 'I can't eat pigs or shellfish or half the other animals on there. They're all unclean.' But God commanded, 'Don't call them unclean. I've made them clean.' Over and over again he said this to me. Three times, he said it."

For those listening, it had to be a hard message to swallow. And yet, it also had to make at least a little sense to them. Because Jesus had talked to them about this very thing. He had told them that the things that go into a man don't make him unclean. It's the things that come out of him that do. What we eat or touch shouldn't matter. It's what we do that God cares about. And what we say. And what we think.

So how could they call Peter unclean for eating with a Gentile? There they were, sitting in judgment of him, with all of this sinful hate and bitterness toward the Romans and all of this sinful pride in their Jewish heritage. Who was really unclean here? Peter? The Gentile he ate with? Or was it... them.

One by one, I imagine, the men were forced to let go of their indignation and hang their heads in shame. But there was more to the story and Peter told them everything that occurred. How God told him he would meet three messengers and then he did. How he met with the centurion, how this was a devout man who had studied the Law of Moses just like them, and how God had spoken to him too. How he shared the Gospel with Cornelius and how the Roman and his family believed every word of it.

And then, how he baptized them. Not just Cornelius, but the whole household. His wife. His servants. His children. All of them, from old men to little infants, were baptized by Peter.

Which had to sound a little odd to those listening. Because baptism started out as a Jewish custom. From everything we know, it was something that John the Baptist came up with as a sign of repentance. Of faith in the Messiah. Was baptism really appropriate for Gentiles?

Well, yes, it was. Because the Lord had told them just before his ascension to go and make disciples of all nations through Baptism and the word of Christ. All nations. All peoples. Jew and Gentile. Male and female. Young and old. Because this baptism wasn't like John's baptism. John's baptism was one of merely water. A sign of repentance and nothing more. But Jesus' baptism was with the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes, things change.

The disciples knew that. They had seen it and experienced it at Pentecost. A life changing moment when miracles happened and thousands came to faith. And now Peter was seeing that very change come over Cornelius. So how could he possibly stand in God's way and refuse this man the very baptism that Jesus had instructed them to give to all nations. Even Rome.

That was a new lesson for the Church. A new way of thinking. God had told Peter, "Don't call them unclean. I've made them clean." He was talking, at the time, about food. But it applied just as strongly to Cornelius. Because uncleanness doesn't come from the outside. It comes from the inside.

And Baptism is about far more than cleaning dirt on our skin. It's about cleaning the dirt in our souls. About cleaning a Gentile into one of God's people. Cleaning even a Roman soldier of all the blood on his hands and all the guilt in his heart until he's white as snow. Cleaning a child of the world into a child of God.

Peter was able to call Cornelius a friend and a brother in Christ. Not because he was circumcised as a child. Not because he followed the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Not because of anything either of them had done. But because God made him Peter's brother.

We all have one Father. We all have the privilege of calling Jesus Christ our brother. And if Christ can forgive Cornelius, a Gentile from a shameful people, and a coward like Peter, who denied his Lord three times, and a sinner like me, filled in faults and weaknesses, then he can forgive you. And if Christ can forgive me and forgive you, then he can teach us all how to forgive.

For the disciples in Jerusalem, the rules had changed. And I think sometimes we forget that. This isn't about being part of a club or a secret society. With rules and rituals and invitation only memberships. This is about being part of a family. The family of God. The family of those whom God has forgiven. And the family of those who have been taught how to forgive.

This account from Acts ends in a wonderful way, I think. Peter finishes speaking and the whole room goes silent. Nobody can say a word.

And then, all of a sudden, they begin glorifying God. "*Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.*" They realized that it didn't glorify God to hold onto a grudge against Cornelius simply because of his ethnicity and heritage. God had done something amazing: he had forgiven a Gentile. He had welcomed a Gentile into his kingdom. He had made a Gentile part of their family of faith.

When God forgives – whenever he forgives, whoever he forgives, however he forgives – it is an amazing thing. It is not a time to question or criticize. It is a time to glorify God. And to welcome this new believer into our midst. Amen.