

In the reading from the Book of Acts we hear about how God revealed to St. Peter the breadth of his love for humanity. It's a love that knows no boundaries. That's what we're going to talk about this morning, the boundless love of God, and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

PRAYER

READ Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³"You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' ¹⁰This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹²And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"¹⁸When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

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Word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

In the beginning, the center of the church was in Jerusalem, the heart of Judea. Thus the first Christians were Jewish Christians, which makes sense. After all, Jesus was Jewish, the promised messiah from the tribe of Judah.

Judaism was exclusive, meaning that the way you became a Jew was that you were born a Jew. There were exceptions to the rule, but they were exceptions nonetheless.

As a reflection of this exclusiveness, far back as you can go, the Jews referred to everyone who was not Jewish as a "gentile." "Gentile" is a Latin word which is translated as "not Jewish." In Hebrew the word is goy in the singular and "goyim" in the plural. In Greek "gentile" is "ethnos," as in an ethnicity or nation.

For the Jews this distinction divided the world into two parts, that is, those who have the covenant with God which he established through Abraham, and everyone else, the "goyim." The Greeks? Goyim. The Romans? Goyim. The German Lutherans? Goyim.

The leadership in the first Christian church in Jerusalem was set on maintaining its Jewishness. In the reading from the Book of Acts we heard about a group leading this campaign called the "circumcision party." This wasn't a party as in a cocktail party! But it was a party as in a political party. It was a group which defined itself according to certain values, beliefs, traditions, and behaviors. I'm sure it had more than one issue, that it had certain practices its members held dear in addition to circumcision. And I'm also sure it didn't call itself the "circumcision party"! But this was a title which was given to it by others who saw it as a group of hardcore fundamentalists whose ultimate expression of faithfulness was circumcision.

God had to directly intervene at this point. It was an impasse. Jesus hadn't taught that circumcision was no longer necessary. So God gave Peter a vision, which was his defense when he was called on the carpet by the circumcision party.

He told them, **Acts 11:5-9**, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter;

kill and eat.'⁸ **But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'**⁹ **But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.'"**

In his vision, Peter saw..... a delicatessen! All kinds of creatures came down from heaven against a white background or "sheet." It was a plain background so he could see the hooves of pigs, the needles of the porcupines, the scales of snakes and lizards, the shells of sea creatures, and the features of other animals once declared unclean by God, until now. What was once inedible was now dinner!

In the Old Testament God gave his people strict dietary laws. We're not sure why, but some of the laws probably had to do with health and hygiene, like the danger of eating undercooked pork. And some of the laws had to do with practices associated with idolatry, like eating blood.

The Lord told Peter to kill and eat the animals he saw in his vision. But Peter said, "By no means Lord! For nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth." This came from the Jewish paradigm of holiness in Leviticus, which Peter, a devout Jew, knew very well. He had always obeyed the laws concerning purity that the Lord might hear his prayers and receive his offerings.

Nary a particle of non-kosher food had ever touched Peter's lips! That's why he had the courage to tell God he wouldn't eat the unclean things he had shown him. Indeed, if what he was hearing was to be believed, everything he had been taught was being turned upside down!

But then the Lord said the most remarkable thing: "**What God has made clean, do not call common.**" With that statement God accomplished two things. First, he freed the people from the dietary restrictions he had placed on them earlier, and, second, by way of metaphor he was prepared Peter for the next step in his understanding of his plan of salvation for humanity: He was going to take the Gospel to the goyim, the ethnicities, the nations of the world.

The reading in Acts continues with Peter saying, **Acts 11:10-14, This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven.**¹¹ **And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea.**¹² **And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also**

accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter;¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

When Peter said that “this happened three times” he was pointing out that according to the law, the truthfulness of his vision was from God. And then he pointed out that “three men” came to his house from Caesarea, which fulfilled the law concerning the rule of witnesses. And then there were the “six brothers” who accompanied Peter to meet the Gentile who had asked for him, the unclean goyim, which was twice the number of witnesses necessary to give an account for something that might set a precedent concerning things in the church.

Peter continued, **Acts 11:15-18, As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.**¹⁶ And I remembered the Word of the Lord, how He said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

When Peter said that “the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning,” he was referring to what happened to the disciples on the day of Pentecost. The disciples had received the gift of speaking in languages which they had never spoken before, also called the gift of tongues. They spoke the many languages of the people who were in Jerusalem on that day, that they might hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own language and so be saved. So when the Holy Spirit “fell on” the goyim with whom Peter met they too spoke in the tongues of other nations. This was a sign that God had embraced the Gentiles as his children, and that these new believers would be sent out to give witness to his grace to other people as well.

We read that after Peter shared his story the circumcision party “fell silent.” They were dumbfounded, speechless. What Peter said was a true conversation stopper. But they couldn't ignore him. What he had said was either a deal-breaker or a deal-maker.

I think it went like this: After Peter spoke they were all looking at one another with this expression (poker face). But then miraculously they all came to the same conclusion, and

with one voice “they glorified God” and said, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life”!

I wish I could tell you that was the end of the debate concerning how Jewish a non-Jewish Christian had to be in order to have assurance of salvation. But it was an issue for a long time. St. Paul talked about it a lot in all of his major works. For example, he wrote, **Galatians 5:6, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”**

“Faith working through love”: Brothers and sisters in Christ, God loves you so much he gave you his only begotten son, Jesus, on the Cross for the forgiveness of all of your sins. And on the third day he rose from the grave and opened the door to eternal life for you and for me.

As you know, I’m going to Africa next week. I know, crazy me! But I have so much faith in this message of forgiveness, redemption, and eternal life that I can’t help but be a part of the movement to share this Good News, wherever it might take me. This is how I understand “faith working through love.”

Peter followed God’s law because he hoped it would make his prayers and offerings more acceptable to God. But God’s love for you and for me through Jesus is complete, and we may ask him for anything we need “just as dear children ask their dear father.”

Indeed, as I prepare to go to Africa I believe with all my heart that God is my Father who art in Heaven and he hears my prayers.

“Faith working through love”: Repentance does lead to life, a life of peace and contentedness, a life free from guilt and shame. God’s love for you and for me is that great.

Friends in Christ, in my own heart and mind I know that I am not worthy to be God’s ambassador to Africa. But I am absolutely confident that the life God has given me he will use to accomplish the work he has given me.

Brother and sisters, that’s my calling, that’s our calling, to be a tool in the hands of the Lord.

This week and in the weeks and months ahead may you be filled with confidence that the Lord he loves you so very, very much.

May you be filled with courage to do something to show the world how much Jesus means to you.

And this week may you have the opportunity to show another person what “faith working through love” means to you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.