

“... Even to the Gentiles”

**First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Lev. 19:1, 9,10, 33, 34, 37

New Testament Lesson: Acts 11:1-18

I got a call recently from a guy wanting to learn more about different denominations within Christianity. I told him about how the Presbyterian form of governance is representative, with folks elected to serve alongside pastors in making decisions, whereas other denominations use bishops and priests. He was fine with that.

As we talked, however, it became clear he was very concerned about certain changes that have occurred over the years regarding church leadership and participation. For instance, It used to be that women were not permitted to serve in leadership roles like Deacon, Elder, and Pastor. He was OK with that change, even though the Bible clearly says in 1 Corinthians 14, “...Women should remain silent in the churches” (33-35), and in 1 Timothy 2, “... Do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man...” (12).

Though he was OK with churches seeing their way clear to allow female pastors and church officers, he found it quite difficult to even consider other areas of inclusivity. And therein lies the danger that today’s scripture passage points to. After Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and ascension to heaven, Peter is criticized by the other apostles and believers for accepting Gentiles as full participants in the church. The word Gentile means non-Jews.

Remember, the earliest Christians were Jews who came to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Those Jewish Christians had a lot of rules and regulations that dated back to the Law of Moses, as given to them-and us- in the first five books of the Bible.

One of the rules prohibited eating certain foods, such as pork, because it was considered unclean. That’s the rule Peter struggled with in today’s scripture lesson. There were two primary reasons for this rule. First, by not eating pork and certain other foods, the Hebrew people since the time of Moses had been set apart from all other nations and tribes.

This was important because each nation had their own gods and followed different religious practices. The Egyptians, for instance, believed certain animals were holy and, thus, worshipped them. Other pagan practices included sex cults, which resulted in sexual slavery and abuse. God’s people were not – and are not – to engage in or condone such abusive practices.

In addition to distinguishing the Hebrew people from these Gentile pagans, the Law of Moses protected them from illness and disease. For instance, we all know that pork in particular has to be thoroughly cooked, and yet people back then ate their meats undercooked at best. So that's why, when Peter returned from eating with the Gentiles, the other disciples criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

For us, the question of socializing with and accepting Gentiles would be much different. If in the Jewish faith, Gentile means non-Jew, what does it mean in the Christian faith? Obviously, non-Christian.

Interestingly, it doesn't mean non-male, non-straight, non-white, non-American, non-poor, or non-anything else we might use to define people who are different from us. Even more interestingly, Christians down through the centuries have been called to reach out to and fully include people who are different from one another. That's what Jesus did in eating with tax collectors and that's what Peter did in eating with Gentiles.

So, let's look at how Peter dealt with this challenge to accept people different from him. Explaining his discernment process, Peter told the other disciples how God came to him in a dream, saying, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." This came after God had shown him a vision of four-footed animals considered by the Jews to be unclean.

And Peter says to God, "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." Wow! "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Does this mean that things are not as cut-and-dry as we may think? Does this mean that God can change his mind?

Yes, and no. While God can indeed change his mind – for nothing is beyond God – there is a much simpler explanation for what's happening here. It's not God who has changed, but rather us and our circumstances.

What was once abhorrent to God – the eating of pork, for instance – is now OK, since we can now eat pork responsibly without hurting ourselves or others. For this reason, Christians do not judge and exclude people based on what they eat, where they were born, or what they do, as long as what they do is in keeping with a love of God and neighbor, devotion to Christ alone, and reliance on the Holy Spirit to show the way. That's how we know what is right and what is wrong - through discernment, over time, in keeping with the spirit of God.

Right and wrong, take for instance the guy who hadn't been to church for a long while. He decides he'd better go to confession before starting back. When he enters the confessional box he's amazed to find that it's got a bar lined with decanters of the finest Irish whiskey and Guinness on tap. Behind the bar is a collection of the finest cigars. As he's looking at this in wonder, the priest comes in. "Father, forgive me," he says. "It's a long time since my last confession. I must say, though, that the confessional box is much better than it used to be. The priest looks around and says, "Wait a minute. You're on my side."

We know what's clearly right and wrong, and we know how to find our way when it's not so clear. To be a faithful Christian, we must follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the living word of God and at the heart of all scripture is love, for "God is love," as the Apostle John wrote. John goes on to say, "...The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."

Those who do not know and love the Lord, those who have yet to hear and experience the Good News of Jesus Christ, those who to us would be considered Gentiles – that is who we are called to include and accept, confident in the power of Holy Spirit to lead them to faith right alongside us.

Underscoring this message, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?" he asks. "And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" Everyone who is open to God's love and the Lord's leading is included in building up the kingdom of God, regardless of any distinctions we might try to make.

Both Paul and Peter were sent by God to bring outsiders into the faith, as are we. Both relied on the Holy Spirit to lead them, as do we. And both faced their doubts and uncertainty about what's right and what's wrong, what's acceptable and what's not.

After all, Paul was a persecutor of Christians before seeing the light of Christ. And Peter was a denier of Christ, and here, a denier of God's message, saying at first, "By no means, Lord," when he was called to broaden his social and religious thinking. When Peter struggled with this, God opened his eyes to the Holy Spirit, who showed him the way.

Peter is sent by God to the Gentiles -the foreigners- and he begins by telling them about Jesus. "As I began to speak," he says, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.... 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?"

Peter told the Gentiles about his experience of Jesus and his reliance upon the Lord, and the Holy Spirit sorted out all the rest. Peter was not asked to judge, but to speak; not asked to exclude, but to embrace – and so are we.

We are called to reach out with open arms to those who need to hear and experience the good news of Jesus Christ, as embodied by us. And in Christ, we can be confident that the Spirit of God will guide us in loving them into the faith and guide them to embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior, teaching them what that means for their lives.

Who might be the Gentile in your life – that person or type of person so different from you that you judge them less than? Maybe someone comes to mind right now. Maybe God will bring someone to you in the days and weeks ahead. In that moment, decide right now, how you will respond. Will you allow those differences to keep you apart, or will you overcome those differences in a heartfelt display of God's love and acceptance, trusting in the Holy Spirit to handle the rest? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of holy hospitality, you make the world your neighborhood. Opening yourself to all, you care for those in special need – body, mind or soul. As those who long to re-create your beloved community, we discover many neighbors, far and near, and many in great need.

We lift up those in our community and those around the world who are injured or sick, who long for your healing.

We pray, too, for those struggling amid disagreements, those whose differences keep them from seeing their common humanity. For all of our neighbors in need, Lord, near and far, we pray your grace and mercy.

And for us, Lord, teach us to create a new sense of community with those who share in your Spirit from whatever walk of life they come to us.

We pray all this in unity with one another, using the words that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**