

Sunday July 17, 2022

Lesson 7: The Quest for Inclusive Fellowship

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

Context:

We continue our unit of unpacking life in the Spirit as found in the work of the early church being moved by the Holy Spirit. This week we examine how the Holy Spirit moves us to discern how God's love for all people transcends human obstacles and cultural norms. We will explore how the early church learned to embrace God sending them people instead of rejecting them.

Today's lesson comes as part of two chapters in the book of Acts focused on explaining the witness to the gentiles and their joining the church. The question to drive the theological and literary skills Luke utilizes in this chapter is the question "Will the gentiles be saved?"¹ The first part of the question begins with a literary practical example with the story of Cornelius, a Roman army officer. The latter part of the question is answered with a theological explanation with Peter's speech to the assembly at the church in Jerusalem. Given the length and breadth of the narrative, we can deduce we are dealing with a crucial concern for the book, a turning point in the drama of redemption.² How Luke addresses this narrative will drive the church forward in a particular trajectory.

Cornelius, a gentile God-fearer, has a strange vision and wants someone religious to help him process what he has seen. The apostle Peter also has a strange vision with a sheet coming down with all sorts of animals. When Peter is instructed to eat, he protests on the grounds of keeping loyalty to sacred dietary laws. The voice instructs Peter never consider unclean what God has made pure. This happens three times until three men show up to escort Peter to the Roman army officer's house and the Spirit tells Peter to go.

At the house, the Roman army officer tells Peter of the vision to seek him out and then Peter preaches to him with the result being the conversion of the household. The word begins to spread and more gentiles in the area come into the faith. All is well until he returns to the church in Jerusalem where there is anger for his table fellowship with the gentiles. The question of who shall be admitted to the church's table is a thoroughly religious question.³ Even as Peter recounts the vision given unto him about what is clean and unclean, the final clencher comes when he says, "the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction."⁴ The church is silent as if they are beginning to realize this is a new saga in the story of the people of God. God finds a way to reach people even with humanity trying to make distinctions and partiality between people. Once God promises to do such things as coming to give good news to all people, no human attempt can squelch God.

¹ Willimon, William H. "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 93.

² *Ibid.*, 95.

³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Application

Peter's vision is one where we have a picnic of sorts presented unto us. Like a good menu at a restaurant, there are options for all sorts of different dishes for various appetites. Yet the point is not about fulfilling Peter's hunger pangs even as the vision invites him to kill one of the animals so he might whip up his favorite meal. Instead, the focus is upon the origins of the creatures and how God made all these animals and thus they are not impure at all. What God has made, let no one tear down or disdain.

Before we rush to assert this was the Jewish community practicing snobbery and being tied to the law, we should consider how many rituals and traditions begin with origins which are later lost to other generations. For the Jewish community, these eating laws came from their ancestors and their origins were tied to health concerns as well to distinguish them from other communities. Some might say the same of various traditions we have today where we practice them and do not know why such as facing the cross for the *gloria patri* in traditional worship. We know it is important and yet we may have lost knowledge of where it began.

Yet the point for Peter and the early Christians is for them to consider where the Spirit is moving and, in some ways, stepping on their toes about human distinctions and partiality. In this case, it is the question of who can belong and what are the qualifiers for being in the community of faith. As we discover, the Spirit does not care what traditions have set the precedent or what makes people feel comfortable. Instead, it is about the good news of Jesus Christ being offered and humans stepping out of the way so God can move.

If there could be one critique of the church today, it would be we have like our early Christian community forgotten how to embrace the people God sends us as we seek to enforce our human distinctions and partiality to accepting others. It is as if we think our norms or standards, even if we believe we have good theological reasoning, has blinded us from embracing the gospel and how the Lord came for all and not just those we deem worthy. We forget of how when we judge or condemn others, we are also making the claim God has made something or someone impure or dirty.

In my own walk with Jesus, I know I have been guilty of making assumptions about people based on criteria whether it was their clothing, their behavior, or perhaps by some symbol affiliated with them like a car sticker. I make a snap judgment of where they will fall on my acceptability scale, and I assume things about them. Sometimes it comes from previous experiences or at other times it comes from the cultural norms I grew up with in lower Alabama.

Yet time and time again God has stepped on my toes to see people differently. Sometimes it comes from an encounter or conversation with those people I "other," or other times I come to stories such as this one and I feel the Spirit saying "Well what about those people? You think they're impure even though I made them?" Who am I to judge what God will do with others, and have I forgotten Jesus' last commandment to love others just as our Lord has loved each one of us?

Today in the church we can often get caught up in the culture wars of our days. Whether it comes with phobias about international identities, race, gender, or sexual orientation, we get caught in a rut where our words always start with "Well I am not judging, but God said..." and once again we fall victim to what our early church community faced. We missed how God has sent people into our lives not to condemn, criticize, or put up the "no entrance" sign. Instead, God has invited us into the law of love where there is freedom to realize how love covers a multitude of sins. God also invites us to think very carefully about who and what we deem as impure and to do a check on who is who with being the creator of the universe.

Why do you think it was so important for Peter to communicate his vision to the early church? How do Christians damage our witness when we deem people as impure or unclean? When have you felt God convicting you to love someone different? Why do you think God wants all people to receive the good news? What does fearing others who are different than us do to our relationship with God?

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