

Sermon – “Them and Us”
Scripture – Acts 11:1-19
Sunday, April 24, 2016
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As we continue in the Easter Season of the liturgical year, today’s scripture reading is Acts 11:1-18, which relays the story of Peter’s explanation to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem for his table fellowship with and inclusion of Gentile believers. This story is relayed three times in Luke’s brilliant historical book of Acts signaling its importance and the developmental nature of any new understanding. Peter “the rock” who affirmed his love and devotion to Christ along the Tiberias Sea three times is the one who leads the way for a change of heart and perspective among early Jewish believers as to what is acceptable in God’s sight. As people who believe we are reformed and always reforming, may these words open doors and insights to the ways our limited perspectives hinder God.

1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 "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. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'" 8 But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'" 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'" 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 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. 13 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; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'" 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 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.'" 17 If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" 18 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." Amen.

Title of the Sermon: “Them and Us”

The text: “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.”
Acts 11:12

Let us pray. Holy and loving Creator God, who are we that we should hinder you? Speak to us anew this day of who you are and of the desire of your heart for creation to live together in harmony, love and respect. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Sometimes we forget about the radical nature of God's love and how revolutionary the Christian movement was in the first century of the Common Era. What Peter introduced to the leadership within the new sect of Judaism known as the "People of the Way" is mindboggling, unbelievable, beyond the pale, impossible. To accept and to eat with Gentiles was unthinkable, and yet this is what Peter is proposing, not by his suggestion (Peter was as uncomfortable with the idea as his cohorts). It was the Spirit who directed Peter to do so and as he confesses, *If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?*

Following centuries of maintaining the identity as a special people of Yahweh set apart by circumcision, keeping the law and Kosher culinary practices, those listening to Peter's report were dumbfounded. Part of the reason Jews did not eat with Gentiles was the fear of becoming unclean through contact with meat that was considered profane or dedicated to an idol. Their religion taught them that Gentiles were inferior and outside the family of God. The concern they expressed to Peter was genuine and grew out of their religious experience and teachings.

We learn from this passage that first century believers were not reluctant to voice their differences. Peter entered the Jerusalem church and squarely faced his critics. His response is not argumentative or tightly reasoned. In fact, Peter understands their criticism, identifies with their anxiety, and does not trivialize it. *Ironically, their criticism of Peter echoes his own hesitancy to obey the directive of his divine audience to eat non-kosher foods.*

As with Peter, the path to discerning God's will and a change of heart "the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives" takes time through a series of "aha" moments based on new experiences, personal reflection and a new understanding of God's Word. The Holy Spirit is in the business of rolling stones away from the tombs that keep our enclosed worlds small and calling us into the light of day with expanded worldviews that move beyond the perspective of "them and us!"

Although Peter's vision initially left him baffled, his understanding of God's call to the Gentile mission unfolds. The process of getting on the same page with God often takes time and involves moving out of our comfort zone and past the narrow religiosities upon which we have built our lives.

Peter responds to his critics by telling a story, an honest account of his unexpected and enlightened experience. It is the story, not argumentation, which changes their hearts. Luke tells us, *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.'*

Stories, not arguments, transform lives. Had Peter come to argue theological points or debate doctrinal differences, he might not have been able to make a change in their perspective. Generally, arguments tend to crystalize differences. Debates tend to keep two sides apart. In debates and arguments, there are winners and losers. However, stories have the power to change hearts and lives... not only the old, old story but also the story of how God has acted in each of our lives; speaking to us in that still small voice, encouraging us to overcome our stereotypes, our anxieties, our preconceived notions of *them and us*, and to see God's call to us in more universal terms.

We sometimes forget the power of stories! We rarely tell our children the stories of how we have experienced God. We seldom tell our young people stories of how God changed our minds, redirected our paths, and opened new horizons for us. We do not tell the stories because we do not want to appear manipulative or better-than-thou or self-righteous, or to speak of holy places and times for which words are not always adequate. We do not want to appear weird or fanatical. So we keep our stories to ourselves, telling them only in the most careful contexts and in the most measured ways. This can be a loss for all of us.

Because of Peter's courage to tell his story, the inclusive nature of God's love in Christ Jesus formed the early church. Peter is the one who planted the seed of inclusivity as the patriarch of this new sect. The recent convert Paul became the one to carry the good news of Christ's love to the Gentile world. This journey would not be without complications, conflicts, or missteps along the way. And isn't this always the way with change, we take one step forward and three steps backward. One minute we are certain, the next not so! One can only speculate concerning the subsequent course of human history if the Christian faith had remained one of the several sects within first-century Judaism. But this was not to be!

The Spirit that would not be contained in the tomb, the Spirit that told Peter not to make a distinction between *them and us* is the Spirit that opened up a new world for the followers of Christ. They embraced one another across race, station in life, and gender, astounding the culture of their time. The congregations who were the recipients of New Testament letters became known for their radical inclusion, shared leadership and deep affection for one another. As described by Paul in his Letter to the Galatians:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Reading this story as contemporary Christians, we celebrate the courage and openness of first century believers who were led by the Spirit beyond their prejudices—prejudices which were strengthened by religious teachings of the time.

We ask forgiveness for all the ways the Church has fallen short of their courage through the centuries by using religious teachings to silence women, to subjugate people of color, to exclude persons from marriage, to disrespect the earth and to invalidate other faiths.

And we pray for courage and openness to the leading of God's Spirit in this twenty-first century as we embrace the Risen Christ whose love conquered death, the Sovereign God who shows no partiality, and the Holy Spirit who tells us not to make a distinction between *them and us*. So be it! Alleluia! Amen.