

5th Sunday of Easter
5.15.22

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then 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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If 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?” ¹⁸When 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.”

John 13:31-35

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
(495)

Jenga, a game, comes with fifty-four pieces, wooden building blocks you use to build a tower. Three blocks per story, laid thatch-like, they pile eighteen stories high. To play the game, you take turns pulling pieces out, one piece per person per turn. Eventually, of course, the tower falls because too many pieces have been pulled out. If it falls on your turn, you lose.

Peter was pulling a piece out from the tower.

Several pieces more like.

Peter had received a vision. He’d been praying on a rooftop in Joppa when he had a vision that hollowed out the purity codes, the laws regarding what Jews could and couldn’t eat. In the

vision, a sheet lowered before him and, as it came to be spread, animals of all sorts appeared there—four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, all things not to be eaten

But the voice of the vision commanded him to prepare the animals as food and to eat.

He refused, but the voice insisted.

He refused, but the voice insisted.

Three times: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

But see, this hollowed out the purity codes—all those kosher laws to be found in the Torah, those first five books of the Bible where it is spelled out how to be a Jew, how to be a Judean or an Israelite, of the *house* of Israel and of Judah. These were as if building codes, and Peter was removing a weight-bearing wall.

You know, in those first five books, there’s the story of the creation and the re-creation following the Great Flood. There’re the stories of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) followed by the story of Moses and the exodus. Then there’s the long story of the foundation of this people, their long years in the wilderness when these former enslaved became a people.

They’d once been not a people. They just happened to hold a common station in life, slaves in Egypt. But now they were having a shared experience, which would become a shared history, and by which they’d come to share bloodlines. So too they’d come to share law and custom, these remembered as revealed in a series of encounters between Moses and the Lord on Mount Sinai.

And it was here, among the law and customs, that it would be spelled out what the people could and couldn’t eat, how they were to prepare to eat and with whom they could and could not eat, how also they would worship and what they’d offer at the altar for worship, and why and when and how. Really, the Ten Commandments which we of the church understand as Old Testament law were just the beginning. They were followed by 603 more, and it’s these that formed this people as a people, this people as a house.

And the fact that we might not have known about all those other 603 is because of Peter, because of this vision he had, and this action he took as a result of the vision, and his then telling it to the early church that they might know what’s next, now that this ancient house might no longer truly hold.

The vision of eating things previously known to be unclean came in tandem with a vision to Cornelius, a centurion, who was himself at prayer in his home in Caesarea where he lived. Then an angel arrived before him to tell him to go to Joppa, to the house of Simon a tanner, where was

staying Simon, also called Peter. He should ask to speak to him. So he sent these three men of whom we earlier heard Peter speak.

To be clear, this would not have been thought a good idea, for reasons other than just the breaking of the law—though there was that.

To be clear, there was no reason to suspect Simon Peter would receive Cornelius just as there was no reason the likes of Cornelius would seek out someone like Simon Peter. Cornelius was the very embodiment of all that was threatening to the likes of Simon Peter. Not just a Gentile, and so someone with whom Simon would have little cause to want to see, he was a centurion, the very sort who'd only recently crucified Jesus, the very sort in whom violent force was a physical trait, a near physical fact. Cornelius, for his part, would have little cause to think someone like Simon Peter would be of any interest. He was a nothing.

And, yes, the story tells us that Cornelius was known to be a righteous Gentile, someone who, though a pagan, yet feared the Lord. He respected as the ultimate power and authority this God of the Jews, this God who is One. So, that's something. He answered to a higher authority than just his own capacity for brutality. He answered to a higher power than just Caesar or Rome. He had a conscience. That was good.

But could Peter really trust *that*?

This is a so-called double-vision story, which we hear of in Acts and then hear of again in Peter's telling it in Acts. That's the way of this biblical book. Double-vision events have it that the Holy Spirit works on two fronts to bring about encounter by which both parties are changed. Then we hear tell of it, the people involved in these double-vision encounters then recounting it all so the hearers might also be changed. This is a book of events and witness, acts and testimony—and all empowered by the Holy Spirit, this spirit that initiates all movement of conciliation and this spirit that then inspired and fills all speech that proves true.

And it is all to the end of bringing up, or better to say a bringing out, a new body politic, the church, whose organizing principle is love.

Love. No rules but love. No laws but love. No status, just love. No distinctions except as can make manifest love—which would hollow out so many other ways by which people gathered in a body politic. Some of these ways: the exercising of power, the playing out of honor and shame, the fair allocation of resources, the sorting by status gender or age or ability or nationality, the recognizing of those with merit. There are so many possible first principles by which to gather a

body politic, so many organizing principles around which to build up what a people are and how they are to function, on their own and with one another.

But here was a new one: love. No rules but love. No laws but love. No status, just love. No distinctions except as can make manifest love.

It wasn't very stable; it *isn't* very stable. It wasn't very clear; it *isn't* very clear. It requires an embodied perceiving as well as a mental act of reasoning, which means it depends upon relationship, encounter, which means it doesn't scale up all that well. It can't easily be codified and still less enforced, for to enforce it is to undo it. Love is freely offered to be freely received. Any other than that is not love.

As for the work that needs to be done to survive: where does that come in? Because a lot of it is toilsome. A lot of it sucks. It's not for nothing, that Joni Mitchell lyric from her song "Passion Play," all about the gospel of Jesus Christ, as it happens. "Who you gonna get to do the dirty work," she sings, "when all the slaves are free?"

And speaking of that, what about wealth, which needs to be accrued for when lean years come or long-term plans open themselves as possible, good: where does that come in? Who's going to be entrusted with overseeing that, investing that, allocating that? Judas is the one who kept the purse. He became the one whom Jesus dismissed just before beginning his discourse on love. He was the one who had just left before the gospel reading this morning began. That's what can happen to a person when given the purse of a society to oversee: they can decide they'd rather have silver than friends.

See, in advocating this, in living it out, Peter was pulling out more than a few Jenga blocks. These were weight-bearing walls. So, what now would uphold all society? If not the laws and customs, which had for centuries been the framework and allowed for functioning, then what?

And you thought this was good news, happy news? You thought it silly that Peter was made to answer for this?

And you thought the gospel wasn't political? Oh, it's political. It's not clearly partisan, but it is political through and through—and the political question it presses upon us is how to be a people whose law is love, whose *only* law is love? How to do that in relation to one another? How to do that in relation to a world full of people, many of whom likely answer to a different law, as we ourselves do, answer to several thatched towers of law?

What's more, how are we to do that with a fixed center but no outer boundary? How to do that with a fixed center, Jesus Christ our crucified friend who is to be our beating heart, but with no outer boundary, no place beyond which love cannot reach and sound its appeal?

And how all the more to do this not as religion but as Spirit, the Holy Spirit who never stays in place but ever works on all fronts, and who hollows out as much as substantiates, who dismantles as much as builds up? The Holy Spirit is not an obedient member of the Godhead, let's just get that said and out of the way. So, how? How are we to do this?

My answer is, I don't know—beyond what were doing right now.

Sorry. Sorry to have brought you this far only to reach the limits of what I can. Turns out, I'm not as good at this as needs be.

Turns out too, the problem Peter unleashed is still a problem, and it's an even bigger problem than at the first, and in large part because of its success. I'd argue it allowed for the liberal world order that we largely live amidst and which we likely regard as good and right, and which some very smart people once imagined as the end of history—and not wrongly, I'd argue, just in terms easily misunderstood. This was the inevitable end of what Peter introduced, the logical aim of a world largely free of law, and of the myths of bloodline and nation and race, all these social constructs that (turns out) aren't essentially true, are just provisionally useful, for many anyway.

But, now that we know there's nothing of eternal truth in these Jenga towers, what are we left with? With what does our liberation from such things now leave us?

Turns out, not much, while also everything.

Not much, while also everything.

Just love.

The weight-bearing walls are all but gone. The roof is but the firmament. The house is all creation. How then shall we live?

That's the question. That's the question whose answer we seek.

Until it's fully realized in our midst, we'll keep gathering to wonder, we'll keep gathering in wonder.

I'll be here.

Thanks be to God.