

C Easter 5
2013 April 28
Acts 11.1-18
“Even to the Gentiles”

In the Anglican church, each service begins with a greeting. The officiating priest says, "The Lord be with you" and the congregation used to respond by saying, "And with thy spirit". However, with the modernizing of the liturgy, the minister now says, "The Lord be with you," and everyone responds with, "And also with you". One Sunday, a visiting bishop went to a church where the sound system was known to be old and unreliable. As he approached the microphone, he tapped it several times and finally said, "There's something wrong with this microphone!" Without hesitation, the whole congregation answered faithfully, "And also with you."

I suspect that's what the "circumcised believers" in Jerusalem must have thought of Peter when he appeared before them. He had entered the house of an uncircumcised Gentile? He had even eaten meals with them, when it was certain they were not keeping kosher? They must have whispered among themselves, "There's something wrong with Peter!"

Whenever Luke wants to make sure his readers are getting a particular point, he repeats a story three times. These repetitions are called "Lucan triads." One of the most famous of those triads is the three-fold repetition of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, a story that we heard only two weeks ago. Saul's conversion is reported first by Luke in chapter 9, then in the process of witnessing on behalf of Jesus, Paul recounts the story again in chapter 22 and then in chapter 26.

The story of Peter's vision with the sheet lowered from heaven and containing all kinds of animals is also repeated three times. First Luke tells the story in chapter 10, then Peter refers to it implicitly later in that chapter, and finally a third time before the circumcised believers in Jerusalem. Three times. Luke wants to make sure we get the point.

You are probably very familiar with the dietary restrictions that are laid out in the Torah, the Jewish law, at least in general. Those restrictions can be found in Leviticus chapter 11. Camels are forbidden. And rock badgers, and rabbits, and of course, pigs. Also forbidden are oysters, clams, shrimp, and so on. Also no eagles, vultures, ospreys, buzzards, ravens, ostriches, seagulls, hawks, owls, storks, or herons.

We know that the primary reason for all of these restrictions was to set the Israelites apart from their neighbors. The LORD calls them to be holy, as he the LORD is holy, and one way they maintain their separateness, their holiness, is by adhering to the dietary restrictions set forth in the Torah. It is not always clear why some animals are considered clean and others, but according to the book some of us are studying these days on Thursday evenings, at least some of those restrictions arise from the LORD's intention to declare as unclean those animals that in some way for fashion mix life and death. There is no time today to further explore God's motivation for the dietary restrictions, but it is important for today's reading from Acts to remember that they are intended to set the Jews apart from their Gentile neighbors.

Beyond that, the Jews of the first century were as convinced as their ancestors and those who came after them that their very identity as a people was tied up in these dietary laws, along with all of the others they were commanded to follow in the Torah. Especially now that they were a minority culture practicing a minority religion, many of them, especially the Pharisees, understood that strict adherence to the law was the only thing that kept them from being absorbed by the majority culture in which they were immersed. If they began to downplay and ignore the dietary laws, their whole identity as a people could be destroyed, and very quickly.

That explains in part why the Jewish believers in Jerusalem were so upset with Peter. They had heard he had eaten with Gentiles, which almost certainly meant he had broken some of the dietary restrictions. What did he have to say for himself?

Peter recounts for his interrogators the story reported in chapter 10, in which he has a vision of a great sheet being lowered down from heaven, and the sheet is filled with animals that are not kosher. Peter hears God's voice telling him to kill and eat the animals, but he protests that he has never eaten anything unclean. The voice replies saying that what God has made clean he must not call profane. This event and exchange between Peter and God is repeated two more times, and then Peter's vision ends.

Immediately some men appear outside the house where Peter is staying asking him to come and see Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, who has also had a vision telling him to send for Peter. Peter realizes the Holy Spirit is behind all of this, and follows the men to Cornelius's house. There he repeats the words that he has heard, that he should not call anyone unclean or profane. He preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his entire household, and the Holy Spirit comes upon the whole assembly, that is a group of Gentiles. The Jews who are with Peter are astounded that the Spirit is given to Gentiles as well as Jews, and Cornelius and his household are all baptized.

When Peter is called on the carpet in front of the Jews in Jerusalem, he repeats this story for them. At the end of his recounting of the amazing tale, Peter says to the leaders in Jerusalem, "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?" "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

Luke tells us that the Jewish leaders of the church in Jerusalem are silenced. And well they might be. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to uncircumcised Gentiles? How can this be? Surely they must first be circumcised and follow the dietary laws, and all of the other 613 articles of the Torah, and then they could have fellowship with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Not so, says Peter. Not so, says the Holy Spirit. God gives the Spirit to these Gentiles without any form of preparation or catechism or physical mark or religious practice. The gift of repentance that leads to life is given to them out of what we call the grace of God. A free gift, without any requirements or prerequisites.

I have recently been reading a little about the way in which the churches of our nation dealt with the question of slavery leading up to the Civil War. As you know, many churches in the north condemned the practice of slavery, and found in the pages of scripture biblical justification for its abolition. At the same time, in the south, prominent theologians were finding in scripture what they saw as justification for its practice. The southern churches' defense of slavery and the question of accepting Gentiles into the growing church of the first century are not identical issues, but they have some strong similarities.

Western tradition dating all the way back to early Jewish rabbis had found validation for slavery, and discrimination against dark-skinned people in general, in an obscure passage in the ninth chapter of Genesis, in which one of the sons of Noah, by the name of Ham, is condemned by Noah. Somehow, by some convoluted logic, the descendents of Ham in western theological tradition became Africans, and dark-skinned people in general. Note that there is absolutely no biblical justification for making this identification, even though this discriminatory notion was passed from the rabbis to the Catholic Church, through the Protestant Reformation and into the churches of the United States.

Thus, according to the argument of the southern theologians, the proper and natural occupation of Africans was to serve the superior white race as slaves, first because of their nature and second because of their inherent sinfulness.

One southern theologian, James Henley Thornwell, wrote this, when one Presbyterian denomination in the south was considering the practice: "I have no doubts but that the Assembly, by a very large majority, will declare slavery not to be sinful, will assert that it is sanctioned by the word of God, that it is purely a civil relation with which the church, as such, has no right to interfere, and that abolitionism is essentially wicked, disorganizing, and ruinous."

In a pamphlet defending slavery, Thornwell wrote, "There are, no doubt, many rights which belong to other men, to his master, for example, which are denied to [the slave]. But is he fit to possess them? The truth is, the education of the human race for liberty and virtue is a vast providential scheme, and God assigns to every man, by a wise and holy decree, the precise place he is to occupy in the great moral school of humanity.

Thornwell was not alone among prominent southern theologians who found grounds for the practice of slavery. Robert Lewis Dabney wrote, "While we believe that 'God made of one blood all nations of men to dwell under the whole heavens' we know that the African has become, according to a well-known law of natural history, by the manifold influence of the ages, a different, fixed species of the race, separated from the white man by traits, bodily, mental, and moral, almost as rigid and permanent as those of genus."

You get the idea. By abusing scripture and appealing to such themes as "natural law" these paragons of the southern church were able to find twisted justification for the oppression of a group of people who are equally children of God. Yes, it is absolutely true that these theologians and indeed all of those who defended slavery were products of their times, and probably unable to see the evil they were promulgating. The point remains: How easy it is for

us to maintain our culturally-based assumptions and practices, even when they are absolutely immoral, and even when they deny God's intention for us as the church of Jesus the Savior.

In the end, of course, the Holy Spirit changed the hearts of those Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Their reply to Peter: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Did they come to this acknowledgement on their own? No. The Spirit did the Spirit's work in their hearts, as well.

One thing is for sure. There is no place in the church of Jesus the Messiah for discrimination or exclusion. Christ's church is a radically inclusive church. Yes, those Gentiles became part of the rapidly-growing church after that meeting in Jerusalem. You find their influence, and concern over their place in the church, in the rest of the book of Acts and in the New Testament letters. In fact, the church rapidly became a movement in which Gentiles became the majority.

In today's reading from Revelation, the One seated on the throne says, "See I am making all things new." One commentator on this passage has written this: "Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, 'What is God doing? Where on earth is God going now?'"