

An Unexpected Change of Menu

Part 4 of Sermon Series:
Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God

a sermon based on

Acts 11:1-18

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Is anybody here afraid of soap and water? No? It's good stuff, right? It gets us clean, and as we all know cleanliness is next to godliness. At least we – of all people – should know that. It was first recorded in a sermon by John Wesley in 1778, even though there are ancient Babylonian and Hebrew religious tracts that convey that idea.¹ One place where you won't find that phrase is in the Bible, even though we hear a lot about cleanliness and ritual purity – in the Old Testament and even into the New. So let's go back to soap and water and that question I asked.

There's a story about a pastor who was visiting one of his parishioners. Let's just say that she wasn't the best housekeeper. It was her home that's fine. As it was getting late in the afternoon, and this was his last visit the pastor began to excuse himself saying, "I've enjoyed the visit but I really must get going. I need to go home for dinner."

To which the woman replied, "Pastor, why don't you stay and have dinner with me? It'd be nice to have company instead of eating alone."

"Well, I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"No trouble. It's my pleasure."

"Can I at least help?"

"You could set the table. The dishes are sitting on the counter."

So, he goes over to the counter where he sees a couple of plates along with some silverware sitting alongside the sink, but they look a little sketchy. "Are these the ones? Are these clean?"

"Oh, yes. They're as clean as soap and water can get them."

The pastor sets the table. The woman finishes up cooking and they sit down for a meal. When they're finished the pastor says, "I really have enjoyed our time together; and thank you for supper. It was nice to have someone to eat with. Can I help you pick up? Or do the dishes?"

"Oh no, pastor. I'll take care of that. It's no problem." Then she takes the dishes from the table, sets them on the floor and whistles. "Here, Soap. Here, Water."

In no time, they were as clean as Soap and Water could get them. How are you feeling about soap and water, now?

I'll admit that story is a little disgusting; but it does draw out the truth that each of us has different ideas about what is clean or tidy. We need to be wary of projecting our own peculiar ideas onto others, especially as we seek to be God's people in the church.

That was a struggle for the early church. Peter and the other disciples knew that the Jews were God's people. They knew that their peculiar ways of being God's people were the right way. They knew that kosher menu pleased God, because it set them apart from all of those other people around them.

That's why Peter was initially so disturbed by that vision of the sheet coming down from heaven with all sorts of animals that weren't kosher and hearing the instruction to "Kill and eat." "By no means Lord, nothing profane (that is not worthy of the sacred) has ever crossed my lips." (Acts 10:13) Three times he saw the vision. Three times he heard the reply, "Do not call profane (or unclean) anything which the Lord has called clean." (Acts 10:14)

He retells this story to the other apostles in Jerusalem in the passage from Acts that we heard from a few moments ago. (Acts 11:6-10) He retells the story of that vision as he defends himself to the others for going to Cornelius' home – into the home of a Gentile. What was he thinking?

It was okay for a Jew to extend hospitality to a stranger, even a Gentile. It's even encouraged in Scripture when he hear in Hebrews 13:2 "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." It's in reference to angels whom Abraham had welcomed into his midst. Nevertheless, there was still an assumption that although one was required to show hospitality, accepting it from a Gentile... eh.

We don't even have an example of Jesus accepting the hospitality of a Gentile. He heard the Canaanite woman's plea about allowing the dog's to eat the crumbs under the table, and healed her daughter. But there, he extended mercy – hospitality. Mk (7:28-29) He didn't accept it. He did ask for and receive a drink of water from a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:7-8), but Samaritans were sort of a special case. They too were children of Israel – just “fallen.”

Jesus accepted dinner invitations from tax collectors and other sinners, but we never hear of him entering the home of a Gentile. He came close by offering to go to a centurion's home to cure his son. But even then, the centurion insisted that he was unworthy and that Jesus could just give the command. (Mt 8:5-10)

What Peter did here is radical. It was outrageous. But it was powerful. Up until that point, the assumption had been that to become a Christian, you must first be a Jew – by birth or conversion. Remember the sign that hung above Jesus when he died on the cross for us. It didn't say “Savior for all people.” It didn't say, “King of heaven and earth.” It said (in three languages) “King of the Jews.”

This sort of goes with a theme that I've preached, that as Christians we need to keep righteous and to be honest in little truths if we are ever going to share the fantastic truth that in Jesus Christ, God came to dwell among us as one of us, and that he died on the cross and rose again so that we might have eternal life. As John says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’” (Jn 3:16-17) That second part, verse 17 is as important as verse 16.

Through that vision, Peter was prepared for the invitation to go to Cornelius and to accept the hospitality of “one of those people.” In doing so, he got to witness the Holy Spirit coming upon them. So, he retells that story to the apostles because they are ticked off. What was he thinking? He's defiled himself (so they thought) because a Gentile's soap and water just doesn't cut it.

But let's think about this for a moment. How much joy do we give others when we accept their hospitality? The negative slant would be to think about how offensive it would be to sort of say, “Ewww,” when someone offers us hospitality.

I don't know what Peter actually ate in Cornelius' home. Did he eat roast beef while avoiding pork? Scripture never really says. But he did go to Cornelius home and I would assume Cornelius wanted to be a good host. I say that because, for example: I don't think that accepting an invitation to visit with someone struggling with addiction means that we should be required to partake. In fact, somethings are just profane (unclean) but wrong. Yet, Jesus invites us to accept hospitality from others and to consider – to really ponder – whether our reluctance or even repulsion is based on own personal, cultural, or even family practices. When they are, to accept what is given. It broadens our experience of life. I don't have to go far in this community to eat Mexican or German or Italian or American food. I don't have to go far in this community to get to experience Mexican or German or Italian culture. Because of that, we are fortunate and blessed.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus gives us “a new commandment, that (we) love one another. Just as (he has) loved (us), (we) also should love one another.” (Jn 13:34) How do we do that accept by accepting the invitation to enter others' lives? When we do – when we accept them as they are and for who they are – we get the chance to share Jesus' love – but also to be blessed in that moment when we too will see the Holy Spirit come upon all those whom God loves as we are renewed through the remembrance of our baptism not by soap and water, but by water and the Spirit. AMEN.

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/cleanliness-is-next-to-godliness>