

A Life of Holiness
First Baptist Church of Rochester
The Fifth Sunday after Easter | May 15, 2022
Acts 11:1-18

This morning's story is about Peter. In the text just read for us, he isn't walking across stormy waters or catching a full net of fish, but is being interrogated by other followers of Jesus.

Jesus has been gone from the disciples for a while now, and, as the early church grew and changed, Peter found himself as one of its early apostles, a traveling minister, baptizing disciples in Judea. Until this point, many of Jesus' disciples thought that God's message was just for the Jews and that pastors like Peter were called to make disciples out of Jews far and wide, but *only* Jews. This was the work that Peter set out to do and the backdrop of today's story.

Jesus himself seemed to confirm this assumption. A few years ago, he had refused to help a gentile woman from Cana, who had shown faith in Jesus, saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "I'm only here for Jews like me," an action that doesn't seem a whole lot like the Jesus you and I know. Around the same time, as Jesus was sending the disciples off on their missions, he told them, "Go nowhere among the gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5–6)." In other words, Jesus specifically told the disciples to go to Jewish cities and to avoid gentile ones. This pattern continues.

Except Peter seems to have gone rogue. Without the other disciples keeping him in line, Peter glances over his shoulders and does the unthinkable in this today's story: He converts a gentile! Would Jesus have even approved? Surely not the other disciples. Just days ago, Peter meets a Roman Centurion, an Italian named Cornelius, who falls at the apostle's feet in what appears to be a profound moment of conversion. Seeing the gentile on the ground in front of him, Peter says what everyone else must have been thinking: "You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider." "But," he says, seeing the sincere faith of the man on the ground in front of him, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Peter keeps going and says words I imagine might make the other disciples cringe, saying, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality [...]. Anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him." How could he deny this man's faith?

As Peter spoke, the other gentiles who were with Cornelius, were overcome with the Holy Spirit, too, and started speaking in tongues and praising God. All around him gentiles were receiving the same Holy Spirit he had. Peter was seeing with his own eyes how the Holy Spirit could be experienced by *anybody* and had no choice but to baptize them, saying, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

Here Peter has received a transformative new glimpse into the sheer wideness of God's mercy, one wider than things as big and important as religion. He has no choice now but to baptize them in the name of the Holy Spirit and accept them as disciples of Jesus and members of the church. There's just one issue. When he meets up later with the other circumcised believers, his fellow Jewish followers of Jesus, and tells them about what happened, he has some explaining to do. They aren't having it. Peter and the other circumcised believers suddenly share a riff and no longer seem to believe the same things about God and who his message applies to. In a matter of moments, the church is fractured, divided. Peter and the Jews who witnessed what happened with the gentiles face intense questioning from the disciples who weren't there to see what had happened, who ask, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

Despite their shared identity as Jews, these two factions of the early church no longer believed the same things about God, at least not when it comes to how the Holy Spirit works and who belongs in God's fold. For Peter, God's message seemed no longer to be just for the Jews. Maybe, just maybe it was inclusive enough for even gentiles.

But for the Jews who weren't there to see with their own eyes what had happened, Peter has not only seemed to ignore the message of Jesus, who said multiple times that he was here only for the Jews, but, by baptizing gentiles, he had broken laws central to Judaism and thrown away tradition.

But how could he not have? The centurion and the other gentiles who were with him seemed to be experiencing the same God that Peter worshiped and were moved by the Holy Spirit just as it had moved throughout the early church in other places. Peter saw with his own eyes that these people had experienced the Holy Spirit and knew they wanted to be baptized, but knew it might cost him. In other words, Peter found himself caught between what his *experience* with God was telling him and what his *religion* said about God.

A distinctive belief in first-century Judaism was that God has made some things dirty and some things clean. A good Jew should avoid dirty things, from certain types of animals and substances to entire groups of people, in order to live out holiness. For many Jews, respecting this distinction is part of what it means to love God and keep his commandments. Gentiles, as non-Jews, were considered dirty, so by sharing a meal with them and becoming physically close enough with them in order to baptize them in the waters of conversion, Peter had become dirty, too, and gone against his religion. The others knew this and believed he'd ignored the basic traditions of his faith. He was unclean, too, now.

But Peter expected this to happen and seemed prepared with a response. He begins justifying his behavior, talking about a recent dream in which he was surrounded by lots of unclean animals. In his dream God tells him to kill these animals and eat them, a sacrilegious suggestion! Peter says, "No! I'm not doing that. Nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth." He kept his faith and resisted the temptation to violate his religion's tradition. Then God says something astounding: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Or, in other words, your labels aren't God's. As his dream unfolds, God has three gentiles from Caesarea show up at his door, and they received the Holy Spirit, as Peter says to himself in amazement, "God has given even to the *gentiles* the repentance that leads to life."

In the 19th century, John Wesley devised a tool for faith that many Christians today refer to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. In his tool, Wesley reminds Christians that there are four major tools that help us experience God: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Most traditions within Christianity today tend to rely more heavily on one of these over the others. For example, we Baptists tend to rely on scripture and experience the most, in my opinion. Our Catholic siblings, on the other hand, tend to emphasize tradition the most. Different streams in the Baptist system, such as Southern Baptists, often claim to value scripture alone. Folks like Unitarians, on the other end of the spectrum, tend to let experience and reason serve as their guiding values above all others.

But if you ask me, all of us use all four in our faith. It's only a matter of whether or not we are able to notice that fact. Not only this, but I believe it takes all four of these tools to live a thoughtful, prayerful life of faith in which our own experiences with God can be interpreted against the experience of others in scripture and those in the past, or tradition. Even here at First Baptist, some of us will differ in which of these four faith tools we find the most helpful. I, for one, really enjoy the stories scripture can teach us and value what my own experiences teach me about faith. You, on the other hand, might be more analytical than I am and value reason as a tool for learning new things about God, yourself, and the church. Or maybe you find comfort in tradition and appreciate learning about how the people before you did things.

But, as this morning's story reminds us, these things are only guides, and when we put one over the other, we forget that all of these tools, helpful and necessary as they are, are only *paths* towards a more faithful life, tools that, while we need them, help us live a life of holiness that only *God* can kindle in us.

The reality is that living a holy life is much harder than it sounds. Peter knew this well and felt caught between tradition and experience, unable to choose both equally, and he faced criticism because his faith didn't fit into a neat box. Meanwhile, his fellow Jews insisted that any doing away of tradition meant a person wasn't honoring God. But, as Peter discovered, God trumps even tradition and the Torah.

In his defense, I don't find Peter and the Jews all that different from me and you. After all, aren't we all just trying to figure out what faith looks like? Peter thought that avoiding eating with unclean people was how *he* could honor God, but God showed him another way to live out his holiness. The other Jews were doing the same thing, but seemed to get stuck on *one* of the four tools for faith. Maybe one day God would move them as he'd moved Peter. What matters, though, is that the new alternative that God showed Peter led him to move *towards* unholy people, not away from them, as the line between him and them faded. "Do not call unclean what God has made clean," God said.

All of which leads me to say... If a belief or tradition in your faith causes you to move away from people, instead of towards them, you should probably break it.

I have to ask, though: What are the rules that we live by today that keep us away from people who aren't like us? What traditions are we hanging onto that are keeping us away from other people? How does the "us vs. them" mentality that the early church struggled with prevent us from loving our neighbors and being a unified church today? And what can we do to check our biases and stereotypes so that we don't make the same mistake of calling "unclean what God has called clean?" How can we move towards people in everything we do?

In the meantime, we all have the tools we need to live a life that honors God, a God who, to this very day, asks us to step across that line between us and our neighbors and risk getting a little dirty. Faith requires rolling up our sleeves, forgetting about what others might think, and just *doing* it. Besides, you can't plant a garden without digging in the dirt a little. Amen.