



## “Resurrection Impact: Blind Love”

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
5:30 p.m. Saturday, April 23, 2016  
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Acts 11:1–18; John 13:31–35

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Our lesson from Acts seems rather straight forward. Peter has a vision that all foods are acceptable to eat. In other words, the dietary restrictions under the Law of Moses are no longer applicable to people of faith.

Okay, so, cool: lobster and shrimp are right up there with a porter house. But there is another, subtler, implication to this lesson that we often times miss.

In our lesson, Peter has gone to Jerusalem to report to the rest of the disciples and elders. This is back when Christianity as a faith is still relatively new, and the majority of converts are of Jewish heritage (which is an important point, as we'll see as the story unfolds). Peter had been out to the coastal town of Joppa (remember last week, and the story of the woman named Tabitha, also called Dorcus, who died? And Peter prayed for her, and she came back to life? That all happened in Joppa) (apparently, Joppa is the happening place). While there in Joppa, Peter has a vision. Well, really, more like an *encounter* with Lord God. Which then, thanks to the involvement of a Roman named Cornelius, it becomes something more, so *much* more, that word has gotten back to the leaders back in Jerusalem, so he heads back so he can explain his actions.

Peter relates the events back to the council, which goes like this: Sometime after the events with Tabitha, Peter is staying with a fellow named Simon, who happens to be a tanner. It is never implicitly stated, but we assume that Simon is a Christian. Peter goes up onto the rooftop to pray (we have to remember that rooftops in this part of the country are basically what we would call a deck. It's outdoor living space, up above street level, away from the noise and the stink and the heat of the road, and open so as to catch whatever breeze might come along). Peter goes to pray, (it turns out that he's kind of hungry) while he's waiting for lunch and praying, he has this vision. He sees this sheet lowered from heaven, with ALL types of food on it: the permitted food, and the stuff they are to avoid (otherwise known as “clean” and “unclean”). A voice says “Get up, Peter, kill and eat” (meaning it's okay to eat everything that is being shown to him). Peter, being the good, law-abiding believer that he is - because even though he is a believer in Christ, he also continues to live by the manner in which he was raised - says,

*“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.”*

To which the voice responds:

*"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."*  
THREE TIMES this happens (Peter isn't really quick on the uptake).

Meanwhile, over in Caesarea, there is a Roman soldier, a centurion named Cornelius, who was called a "God Fearer." That means he was a non-Jew (that is, Gentile) who believed in God, but he did not necessarily follow the Jewish laws and traditions. In other words, he was NOT circumcised, and he did not eat kosher. However, God DID speak to Cornelius, telling him that he was to send to Joppa and find Peter at Simon the tanner's place, and bring Peter back to him because Peter had a message for him. So being the good soldier that he is, Cornelius does as he is told. He sends a couple of servants and one of his soldiers off to Joppa. They arrive just as Peter's vision ends. They knock on the door, these three Gentiles, one of whom is a Roman soldier, at the home of a God-fearing Jew. To put this into perspective for us, this would be like a law abiding Afghani citizen having an American GI knock on his door.

Understand, that as a good, Law of Moses kind of a guy, Simon the tanner could NOT welcome these Gentiles, God-fearers or not, into his home, let alone eat with them. But they knock. And Peter tells Simon to **not only** let them in, but let them stay the night, which of course means, feeding them. And no good host would allow guests to eat **without** eating with them.

Are you catching all of the strikes that Peter and Simon the tanner are racking up against themselves?

So, the next morning Peter goes with these uncircumcised men to Caesarea, where he meets Cornelius, who shares his vision story with Peter, who in turn realizes that there is the hand of God in all of this. Peter begins preaching to the Cornelius and all those with him, explaining who it is that Jesus is, and all he has done. And while he is preaching, the Holy Spirit descends upon these uncircumcised Gentiles (just like the Spirit did to the disciples back in Acts 2), and among other things they start speaking in tongues, so that those Jewish believers that came with Peter cannot deny the presence of the Spirit. Peter asks the obvious:

*"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47 NRS)*

Peter is saying, can anyone here give me a good reason why we should Not baptize these people, who have *Clearly* been blessed by the Holy Spirit? And so these uncircumcised, Gentiles are baptized.

Word gets back to leadership in Jerusalem. Or rather, partial word gets back. And they are NOT amused. And this is where our reading picked up for tonight. Peter goes back to Jerusalem. But did you catch the way that scripture described the encounter? Allow me to quote:

*the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" (Acts 11:2-3 NRS)*

Did you catch what they are upset about? Eating with **uncircumcised** people.

And just to make certain we are all on the same page here, you *are* familiar with what circumcision is, right? It is the removal of, let's call it *extra*, skin, from a rather delicate area of male anatomy. And in almost all cultures, that area, on both males and females, is covered up.

But Peter is dealing with the leadership of the early church. And remember, this leadership is – almost the **entire church** at this point in history is – made up of believers in Christ who are of Jewish heritage. At this point in the life of The Church, Christians came from the Jewish faith. They continued to follow the Law of Moses, with all of the dietary requirements, washing & cleansing elements, and necessary sacrifices that were required under the Law of Moses. Part of which was that you **do not eat with non-Jews**. And what did Peter do? He ate with non-Jews. This is important to these folks. This is a Big Deal.

To help us understand HOW big of a deal this is, let me give you a personal example from my own heritage (I hope I won't bore you). My maternal grandmother was born and raised in Finland. She came to the US as a young woman, eventually settling in Chicago, where she met and married my grandfather. My grandfather, who was born and raised back in the old country of Italy. And while my grandmother had come and joined her sister, my grandfather had joined his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins. And there were those of his relatives who felt that this good Italian boy should have married a good Italian girl. Not some Finn. And because my grandmother did not speak Italian, and her mother-in-law Refused to learn English, another relative would translate for them. Or better said, MIS-translate their conversations, on purpose, because this relative so disapproved of my Finnish grandmother marrying my Italian grandfather. So my grandmother, who spoke Finnish, and then learned English when she came to the states, had to learn to speak Italian out of self-defense. That was a long way to say that we still experience that whole idea of 'you don't mix, you stay with your own.'

So for these Jewish Christians to eat with these (albeit God-fearing) uncircumcised Gentiles, you simply DO NOT do this. You don't eat with those who aren't like you. This is not only tradition and Law (and maybe a *little bit* of prejudice), this was how they did things ("We've always done it this way" - They would have made good Lutherans).

Peter responds, as we heard in our reading, and basically tells them how GOD did this, Not Peter. How GOD called him to Cornelius' household; how GOD blessed these uncircumcised Gentiles with the Holy Spirit; And Peter says:

*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?" (Acts 11:17 NRS)*

Drop the mic, walk off the stage, because, in other words, Peter is saying: *God did this. Who am I to say no?*

Now, isn't it cool, how this starts off as dealing with *food*, and then becomes about *people*? The Law of Moses, for whatever reasons, has all kind of dietary requirements. Some critters you're allowed to eat; others, you are to stay away from. Some food you have to cook a certain way; other food you can cook however you want. Some of those restrictions may have been for health reasons; a lot of them, we're left scratching our heads, trying to figure out why.

But all that becomes moot, none of that matters, after Peter's vision. In his vision, ALL food is acceptable to be eaten. ALL critters are 'good to go'. So believers in Christ can become 'food blind' – they don't have to exam the food they eat; they don't have to make certain it was killed in a specific manner, or make certain it was prepared in the tradition of those who have cooked before us. Yet out of this vision of acceptable food, We suddenly get the acceptance of ALL PEOPLE.

Maybe when we read the gospels, we say "Jesus was talking about all people." but that's not what was thought at the beginning of the church. Maybe you're thinking 'yeah, but, what about back in Acts Chapter 2, when the Spirit descended upon the disciples, and they began speaking in languages from around the world? And there were people there from those places that heard them? Wasn't THAT the acceptance of all people?' To which I would have to answer, No, not really. Because Acts 2, while it dealt with the blessing of the Spirit (like in our reading), it was also talking about Jewish believers from around the known world.

So **now** it does not matter, if you're a male or female; it doesn't matter now whether you've had special surgery. It doesn't matter what your ethnic heritage is, it doesn't matter if you're Roman or Jewish or Italian or Finnish. None of that is important, because **All of Us** are acceptable in God's sight.

God's love is blind to what separates us. God's love is blind to what we eat. Rather, God's arms are held wide open, and we hear God say, not just to the Jewish Christians; not just to the Gentile Christians; not just to the circumcised or uncircumcised, but to Everyone: *Come, and eat.*

Amen.

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