

WHY EAT DINNER WITH THEM?

Acts 11:1-18 repeats the pivotal event in which people who have long been viewed as *unclean* are revealed to be accepted by God. Who is in and who is out – who do we include and who is it okay to exclude?

There is a family in an imaginary church. They sit in the third row every Sunday morning – mom and dad and the four children. They are smartly dressed, shoes polished, hair tidied. They know when to stand and when to sit throughout the service. They know what to do when the offering is gathered and all the hymns are familiar to them. The parents sit between the children so there is no bickering or touching or pestering to disturb the minister's message or the choir's anthem. A knee is smacked when legs start to swing. An ear is flicked if someone dozes off or whispers too loudly to a friend in the next pew. They share their hymnals, follow along in the bulletin, and close their eyes during the prayers. Are they in or out?

There is a family at an imaginary dinner table – grandma and grandpa with their son, a widower, and his three children – one married with children, one divorced, one single but she's well past 40 now and people wonder... Before the meal began, they said a blessing over the food. They are polite to one another, animated in their conversation about world events and local interests and one another's work. One member of the group is moving to a new city and is nervous about making friends, about making a life. The others promise to pray. Another tells about a mission project they are undertaking. A third wonders silently if the others know he hasn't been to church in years. Do we sit at the table with them?

There is a family in an imaginary home. An alcoholic has hit bottom. The spouse and children and grandchildren gather before the long rehabilitation road begins. They talk about ordinary things – the dog, the cat, the neighbor's garden. They ask about providing food or reading material – about offering rides and taking on household tasks. They talk and say little. They ignore how bad their parents look – one ravaged in one way, one in another. Inside their heads, they thank God for another chance – beg God's forgiveness – pray for healing and help. Do we embrace these people or keep them at arms length?

There is a family in an imaginary town. A homeowner and spouse and children as well as hired servants. They weren't born in Canada. They invite a traveling preacher to come to their home and eat dinner with them. They don't know to say grace. They don't have a Bible in the house. They have never been to church. They feel the Holy Spirit and are compelled to seek out the preacher. They believe the good news even though they know nothing about what it is to be Christians. They have worshiped pagan gods and prayed to idols. Must we include them?

Stories are told in Acts about incredible numbers of Jews responding to the gospel message and becoming part of the church. We hear about a group called *the circumcised believers* who are certain they know who can be included and who is to be kept at a distance. They are quite sure that God's plan is for Christianity to remain a movement within Judaism and therefore it must conform to the life and practice of Judaism, as they understand it. Our reading for today deals with inclusion – moving

from circumcision and eating with Gentiles to dietary laws and eating non-kosher food – inviting us to examine our own exclusions based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation – all sorts of criteria.

Peter tells these *circumcised believers* in the church at Jerusalem about his encounter with Cornelius – a Gentile – a devout man – a man who prays. One day, Cornelius has a vision in which an angel instructs him to send for Peter and bring him back to Caesarea where Cornelius lives. Meanwhile, Peter has a trance that convinces him that God wants him to eat with Gentiles and, specifically, that he should go to Cornelius' house. Food rituals separate Jews like Peter from Gentiles like Cornelius, but both men are convinced by their visions that they are to meet each other. When they do, *the Holy Spirit falls upon them*.

A controversy had erupted in Judea when apostles and believers, good Christian Jews, heard that Gentiles were being converted to the faith – had accepted the word of God – the conversion to life. Cornelius and his household had become Christians. A Roman family in a Roman home had heard the good news, had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit – had been saved. However, Cornelius was not a Jew, no one in his household was a Jew and, according to *the circumcised believers*, he could only become a Christian if he was first a Jew – could only be baptized after circumcision – could only do things as they had always been done. It wasn't so much that the Gentiles were accepting the word of God, though this was hardly good news to people who were the bearers of a messianic expectation and a code of laws that nurtured and defined their separation from the uncircumcised and the unclean. The problem was that some people in the early Church, some people on the inside, some people like Peter, were accepting them into the Christian family, were eating a meal with them.

The people ask Peter, "Why eat dinner with them?"

This story is one of those timeless and defining moments in human salvation – an account of an event that is determinative in every Christian's life. What is described is the move from sectarian Judaism to a faith open to all of us whose lineage is not Jewish but Gentile. We have the drive and movement of the Holy Spirit to thank for this.

Luke is careful in telling the story to build the case – piece by piece – for Peter's new perspective on the most important questions for the new church. To whom is the gospel to be preached? Who can we eat with – socialize with? How wide is God's embrace?

Peter had a dream when he was in Joppa, and he witnessed to that dream: he was convinced that the gospel was to be taken to Gentiles, and he insisted that nothing and no other creature or person should be considered unclean.

The books of Acts demonstrates that it takes a long time for the community of the early Christ-followers to accept Gentiles whom they have been culturally conditioned to see as both *profane* and *unclean*. Our reading today is Peter's retelling of his experience from chapter 10, in which he learns the important lesson of not calling any human being *impure* or *unclean*. It must be a hard lesson for Peter because God actually has to repeat the miracle and the message three times to get it through Peter's head. Just as Peter resists the divine voice repeatedly, he too will need to retell the story many times before others become willing to accept those they have long been taught to exclude – to despise and fear.

Acceptance and change takes time. In Acts chapter 8, we see God's grace offered to an Ethiopian eunuch through Philip. It takes time before the community of the early Christ-followers is able to settle the question about accepting the Gentiles. Numerous people patiently and persistently engage in repetitions and conversations – experience threats and acts of violence – as they seek to change long held prejudices – to transform people and institutions.

At first the faithful in Jerusalem must have thought Peter was crazed, but eventually they were amazed at what God had revealed to and through him. They were so impressed that they praised God, saying, "God has given to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

The day that Peter dreamed of innumerable unclean creatures made clean in God's estimation was the day salvation actually came to us – to you and to me. Before that moment, Christianity was not available to those who were not born and ritually inducted into Judaism. Ever since the early church was opened to Gentiles, Christians have struggled to be as open in other times and places, and as willing to embrace those thought to be unclean but whom God has declared clean.

Can you see Peter standing there – finished telling his tale – his face open and a bit perplexed – his shoulders slightly shrugged and his palms turned outward as he says, *"If God gave them the same gift that was given to us when we believed in Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"*

When those who were protesting Peter's actions – those called the circumcised believers – those who were so sure they knew who was included – who was in and who should be out – when they heard what Peter had to say, they were silenced – they withdrew their objections and they praised God because God grants the repentance unto life.

The situation of the 21st-century church is not that different from that of the first-century church in Jerusalem. Today we struggle to maintain a holy community in the church where the glory of God can shine brightly in the lives of God's humble servants. But we do so realizing that we are only human, and that strive as we may, we are not all that holy.

In the first century the dividing line between exclusionary holiness and holy hospitality was circumcision, dietary laws and ritual observance. Today it is racism, homosexuality, gay marriage, and inter-faith struggles. Today's fixations are not the issues that divided Christians at Chalcedon or Nicaea or even Jerusalem, but they are the issues through which we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

It would have been so much easier if the Spirit had left well enough alone and not blown where it did, showing Peter the wider dimensions of a gospel meant for all people, both clean and unclean. But the Spirit is a spirit of love and cannot resist drawing disparate elements together; it has a broader vision of the future and a greater hope for our humanity than we might ever imagine. Who are we to hinder God's grace? **Amen**

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