

Sunday: May 2, 2010

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

Title: Reexamining Our Core Beliefs

Acts 11:1-18 calls us to examine our prejudices, our religious beliefs, our cultural mores and ask if they are really from God, or do we need to look at them in a new way.

Call to Worship: adapted from Psalm 148

Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord from the heavens,
Praise God in the heights above
Praise God, all the angels
Praise God, all heavenly hosts
Praise God, sun, moon, and shining stars.
Praise God, you highest heavens and the
waters above the skies.

Let them praise the name of the Lord
For God commanded and they were created.
God set them in place for ever and ever;
God gave a decree that will never pass away.

Praise the Lord from the earth, you
creatures and all ocean depths.
Lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
Stormy winds that do God's bidding.
Mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars
wild animals and cattle, small creatures
and flying birds.

Kings of the earth and all nations;
You princes and all rulers on earth,
Young men and maidens
Old men and children.

Let them praise the name of the Lord for God's
Name alone is exalted; God's splendor is above
The earth and the heavens.

God has raised up for the people a horn;
The praise of all the saints of Israel
The people close to God's heart.
Praise The Lord!
Praise The Lord!

Hymns: # 344 Christ of the Upward Way
505 Be Known to us in Breaking Bread
add verse 3 So live in us, Our precious Lord
And bend our wills to Thine;
That others may encounter Thee,
And know The Truth divine.
309 Of the Father's Love Begotten

Prayer of Confession: Eternal God, from whom comes every good and perfect gift, we pause to offer you the gift of our submission. We fall into the habit of believing that we are at the top of the heap and that everything in life is dependent on us. We like to believe that we are the masters of our own fate and that we do not need to bow and scrape to anyone or anything. But the truth of the matter, Dear Lord, is that when all our pretense is stripped away, we come to understand that we are here by your grace and that we are sustained by that same grace. So we submit our hearts and minds to you, knowing that you will look past our overblown egos and forgive our swelled heads and return us to that state of grace wherein we will honor you with all our bodies and souls. We pray in the name of The Christ who demonstrated true submission. Amen.

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or do we need to look at them in a new way.

Peter was between a rock and a hard spot. He had violated one of the most sacred social and religious “no no’s” of his day.

Remember, now, the early Church... the fellowship of believers that had sprung up in the weeks and months after the Resurrection was essentially a Jewish sub-cult. 2000 years after the fact, we modern Christians have forgotten that The Early Church was simply a movement within the larger Hebraic tradition. It would be several years before it broke the ties with Judaism and began to conceptualize itself as a new movement. Yes, with roots in the Hebrew traditions, but not a sub-set of Judaism.

The birth pangs of this new Fellowship of Believers were painful and threatened at times to short circuit the movement. Peter’s experience was fundamental to the process of becoming The Church as we know it. Just for a moment, imagine in your mind what the Church of Jesus Christ would be like today if they had never crossed over that divide between Jew and Gentile. In all probability The Christian Faith would have remained a sect of the main Jewish tradition, and Gentiles who were drawn to this Faith would have to become Jews before being included in the Jesus movement. Hard to even conceive of it isn’t it.

But that is not what happened. God was at work in the life of Peter and in the life of Cornelius, The Roman Centurion. And it got Peter in some hot water. When the leaders of the Church back in Jerusalem heard that Peter had entered the home of a Gentile, had

eaten a meal with the Gentile family, and, to make matters worse, had received this Roman Officer and his family into the Fellowship. In all probability Peter had included these Gentiles in the celebration of The Lord's Supper. What saved the day was Peter's explanation that Cornelius and his family were filled with the Holy Spirit. When he explained this to the leadership in Jerusalem, there was a general consensus that The Faith was just as valid for Gentiles as it was for Jews.

It was, therefore, at this point when the early believers began to differentiate themselves from their Jewish roots. Of course the struggle would continue for almost two centuries. Paul would weigh in on many of the issues. But by the year 200 AD The Church of Jesus Christ had become a separate and growing movement which no longer saw itself attached to Judaism. And, by 350, under the Emperor Constantine, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

But the break came when Peter experienced the vision of food descending on a tablecloth from heaven. And Peter hears the voice of God instructing him to eat what is on the cloth. Peter is a good Jew. Certain things you simply do not eat. If you are interested, you can find the laws about food in Leviticus. Many Jews still observe the Kosher Laws that have their origin in early Judaism, when there was no refrigeration and when folks did not know about Trichinosis that pigs could pass on to humans. While it was not too bad for the pigs, it was deadly to humans, so Jewish Law forbid the eating of pork.

Think about what Peter was going through. All of his upbringing was challenged. His belief in certain customs had religious overtones and to violate them was to violate his relationship with Yehweh. His eternal soul was at stake. Imagine, if you will, the turmoil that must have been going on within him. At first he did not understand why God would instruct him to violate the Kosher

Laws. And then something strange happened. Someone came knocking at the door.

Representatives from Cornelius explained that the Centurion wanted to know more about this new Faith. Could Peter accompany them to Caesarea to explain the new Faith to their master? It was like a light bulb going off in Peter's soul. This is what that vision was all about. The Holy Spirit was communicating to Peter a very profound truth. Christ came for all mankind. Peter follows the leading of the Holy Spirit and the rest is history. You and I sit here today because God led Peter and the early Church Fathers through the process of revisioning what God requires.

What started with Peter on the roof top has become one of the fundamental precepts of the Christian Faith. God is constantly revealing new truths to His people and challenging us to examine long trusted customs and mores in light of fresh truth. Let's look at a few times when the Church has struggled, just like Peter on the Rooftop.

1. During the Dark Ages, The Church had been the only institution that was capable of maintaining order in the far flung regions of the Holy Roman Empire. Fundamental to this control was the Latin Vulgate. By maintaining the scriptures in Latin, The Church could dispense the salvation over the masses. The serfs could not read.... Either in their own language or in Latin, so they had to come to the Priest to find out what God wanted of them. Then the table cloth comes down and folks like Wycliff and Calvin and Luther and Wesley and Knox came to a new understanding. Scriptures were just as potent when written in local languages. Wycliff was burned at the stake along with his scriptures. Luther was excommunicated and a price was put on his head. Calvin was banned from France and Knox was

caught up in the struggle in England and Scotland over the role which The Church played in choosing The King of England and Scotland. Just like Peter, it was a struggle that each man went through and when they came out on the other side, The Church had gained new life and momentum.

2. When the settlers from Europe came to these shores in the 15th and 16th centuries, they brought with them a belief in Slavery. For two hundred years or more, the Church placed its imprimatur on the practice of slavery. Dr. Charles Dabney, the well known Presbyterian Pastor in Richmond preached from the pulpit that slavery was ordained of God. It was a way of life and a social and moral code in The South that was next to Scripture and The Trinity. To suggest that Slavery was antithetical to what we believe in Christ Jesus was to be an agent of Satan.

Then the cloth came down and many in both the north and south began to understand that what God has made should not be called unclean and that Slavery was not in keeping with the Christ who came to set us free. And yes, it was a struggle. And many lost their lives in the struggle, but the process of doing away with slavery was important in the witness of the Church of Jesus Christ. Something once held to be sacred fell away like scales from blinded eyes. Sadly, it has been 150 years since that battle was fought and we are still in the process of extending God's Grace to all people.

3. When I grew up in the Presbyterian Church, men ran the Church. All preachers were men. All Elders were men. All Deacons were men. One or two short passages by Paul became as sacred as the Ten Commandments. "Women should be silent in Church". "Men should not be subject to women." The belief that the Church of Jesus Christ should be the sole domain of men and that women could hold secondary status in Christ's Church was sacred to many. Then the table cloth came down and The Church began to hear a new word. It took some time, but finally in the 1960's

The Presbyterian Church came to understand that the gifts of women were just as important as those of men. My mother was the first woman ordained an Elder at First Presbyterian Church in Winchester. She read the book of order and at the first Session meeting she attended, she questioned why there was no financial report. She was politely told that a banker in the church handled all those matters for the Church. Well, you can imagine it took a struggle, but before the year was up, a full financial report was included in each and every Session meeting. The move to include women in the leadership of The Church has not been easy. In 1988 the Presbyterian Church of America split off the main body of Presbyterians over the issue of women Elders and Ministers. When they split, they went back to the Book of Order of 1931 which ordained only men to positions of leadership. But it is interesting to note that this year at the General Assembly of the PCA they will be entertaining a motion to ordain women as Elders and Ministers. God hates injustice and the table cloth is always dropping down and exposing someone's prejudices and insecurities.

We could go on and talk about other issues that The Church has had to face. And each time The Church has struggled to know God's will. One way to think about it is to ask yourself, What prejudices and fear control my life? How have I allowed my Faith to be formed by these prejudices and insecurities? What would be the effect in my life if I had a vision like Peter? What issues would come crashing down if God spoke to me and simply said...."Don't call what I have made, unclean."? Those are powerful words. And they cause us to stop in our tracks and examine our beliefs, just like it did Peter.

One thing I know about this Church I have served for over 40 years. We don't like change. We want things like they used to be when grandmother and grandfather ran things. They sang the good

old hymns and they read from the King James version. They never questioned the traditions. Interesting, isn't it... when the motto of The Presbyterian Church is: Reformed, Constantly Reforming. When you ask me what sets Presbyterians apart from other denominations, that is one of the important points. As reformed Believers, we are constantly searching to reform our faith. Very few things are set in stone. You could probably name them on one hand. There is One God and that God is in control of everything. God's Son, Jesus, came to bring salvation to all mankind. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God and are sufficient to convict us of our sinfulness and witness to our salvation. The Holy Spirit is the third person in the Triune Godhead and this Spirit leads us as we reformulate The Faith and live lives in obedience to God's Will.

And what I am suggesting to you this morning is that most everything else we believe is sacred is up for grabs. How many times have we changed our hymnbook? How many version of Scripture can we find right here among our members. Is one more sacred than the other? Why aren't the books of the Apocrypha included in our Protestant Bible?

What does God really say about divorce? Would it really be a sin for an elderly person who is confined to a fetal position in a bed and cannot communicate to have instructions written for the medical personnel to simply stop treating them and keeping them alive?

And the issues go on and on. The point is that like Peter, when the table cloth drops down and we hear a clear message from God, we need to respond in faithfulness no matter how difficult the issue is, no matter how gut wrenching it might be. God does not call us to an easy life. God calls us to a life of persistent faithfulness. If Peter had not reformed his viewpoint, how long would it have taken before the Early Church had just faded away?

But Peter did change his viewpoint in response to God's leading and the Holy Spirit's guidance. And we can too. Thanks be to God, the father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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