

## *Insiders and Outsiders*

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Acts 11: 1-18

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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There was a Saudi Arabian princess and a U.S. Marine who violated all the rules of the princess's family and faith when they fell in love, fled her country and married in Las Vegas, Nevada.

"They can write a book and make a movie out of this story," said Maj. David C. Andersen, a U.S. Marine Corps spokesman in Washington, D.C. "This story has everything. The movie could be called the private first class and the princess." <sup>1</sup>

Although this story has some spectacular elements, the plot is as old as human history. There's *"them"* and there's *"us."* And *"us"* is better than *"them."* In fact *"us and ours"* should have nothing to do with, *"them and theirs!"*

Though the plot remains the same, the characters change. History is filled with the struggle of class against class, nation against nation, race against race, rich against poor -- and sadly -- even church against church.

In the New Testament, it was Jew against Gentile, Samaritan against Jew, Pharisees against tax collectors and the self-righteous against sinner. <sup>1</sup>

Our lesson today from the book of Acts deals directly with this topic. Who is in and who is out? Who are the "us," the insiders among us and who are the "them," the outsiders?

Our passage begins with Peter returning to Jerusalem and is accused of having associated with the Gentiles. Peter defends himself by retelling the really strange story of the vision he had while in Joppa.

For Peter, as I'm guessing it would be for anybody, this vision is pretty disturbing. This sheet full of animals comes down from heaven close to him. And they weren't just any old animals, but the very animals that had been deemed "unclean," those animals that Peter would never eat. And here God is telling Peter to kill and eat! God telling him to "kill and eat" goes way beyond just not agreeing with his taste buds, it is an affront to his piety, to his devotion to God.

What was God thinking here? Had he not given them to command not

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lectionarysermons.com/may\\_1301.htm](http://www.lectionarysermons.com/may_1301.htm)

to eat “unclean” creatures such as shellfish and pork? The core beliefs that had shaped Peter’s life were now being challenged, and it took a weird vision, angels, and the Holy Spirit to lead Peter to a new way of thinking.

Peter was not the only one who had a vision in this story. A Roman army officer, Cornelius, a gentile, a member of the very army which now so terribly oppressed an occupied Israel had a vision in which an angel told him to send some of his men to Joppa to find Peter.

Just after Peter had awoken from *his* trance, these three men came to Peter and asked him to go to Cornelius’ house. Peter soon realizes this vision is not really about clean and unclean food as it is about clean and unclean *people*. About insiders and outsiders, and who those are.

As he spends time with Cornelius and his whole household, the Holy Spirit falls upon them all and Peter baptizes the whole lot of them.

Well, you know Peter is going to have to do quite a bit of explaining about *this* when he gets home. He has just baptized a whole house full of Gentiles!

He did his explaining to the folks at home and his justification was no other than the Holy Spirit. Verse 12 has Peter saying, “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” And verse 15: “The Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.” If 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?* That’s a very good question Peter asked, it was a question that silenced his inquisitors. It’s also one I think a lot of folks would be well off to ask themselves today. *Who are we that we could hinder God?*

Sometimes I feel bad for us in the church with the boundaries and the rules that are in place. I know we all need boundaries. I can’t stand here in the pulpit and just say any ole thing I want to. I need to base what I say on Scripture, and what has been revealed to me through my study of such. The hymns in our hymnals were chosen very carefully by a wise group of people whose job it was to make distinctions between hymns that have musical and theological integrity and those that don’t. We have rules about having your baby baptized and who can use the Fellowship Hall. We make distinctions all the time in church.

We live in a world of distinctions. If you make good grades in school, you get into a good university. If you are a hard worker, you deserve to get a promotion more than the slackers who work along side you. Not all distinctions are bad.

We may not use the words “clean” and “unclean” in today’s language, but most of us still make distinctions, draw a boundary on one side of the fence or another. Depending where you stand, undocumented immigrants, gays and lesbians, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans might be the unclean.

We can’t be all things to all people, can we? We have to be on one side or another. We have to make distinctions in what we believe. And yet, here is the story of Peter’s vision . . .

*The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.* God does not make distinctions between who is in and who is out of the kingdom. “God shows no partiality.” That became the central affirmation of the early Christian movement. “There is no distinction, Paul said, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” All have sinned, and all have access to the overwhelming grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The church of Jesus Christ is where the old boundaries are broken, and if you insist on maintaining them at all cost, Peter said, you could be ‘hindering God.’<sup>2</sup>

What are we to do when the Holy Spirit starts moving in unexpected ways through our congregation? And it will, I have no doubt. The Spirit, if it hasn’t already, and I believe the Spirit was at work when you called me to be your pastor—the Spirit will come in and challenge our boundaries of what we think it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ—the Bride of Christ in the world. The Spirit will come in and challenge us in ways we can’t even imagine now.

How will we react when the Spirit moves us toward the wideness of God’s mercy? Will we be tempted to *hinder God* because we’ve never done things that way before? I think the best thing to do is just get out of the way and let the Spirit move where it will as we give unending thanks for the Spirit’s presence with us.

We come to the Table today as recipients of the limitless mercy God has for us. We aren’t required to bring anything with us as we meet Christ in these elements—just our love and our trust that God will sustain us, God will nourish our souls and God will be with us. God will be with us as those boundaries and distinctions between who is an insider and who is an outsider are obliterated and erased. And that, my friends will be the Kingdom of God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Kenkeremath, *Making Distinctions*, Acts 11: 1-18