

May 19, 2024  
 Lesson 12: Pentecost Reimagined  
 Scripture: Acts 11: 1-18

**Context:**

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Today we continue our unit titled “Empowering Spirit,” as we examine how Jesus and the Holy Spirit led people to focus on spreading the gospel to languages where others could understand the gift of faith and grace. Today’s lesson will focus on thankfulness to God for prevenient grace which enabled Gentiles to “change their hearts and lives” and does the same for us.

Today’s scripture lesson comes from the book of Acts and describes the conversion of a Gentile to the Christian faith. Up until this point, most disciples of the Way (the name for early followers of Jesus), came from a Jewish background. As a result, there is great consistency in belief, behavior, and social connections. Yet the narrative in chapter eleven will change this normality as new individuals will be brought into the faith who come from a different economic, social, and religious background.

Acts 11 comes after Peter has met with a Roman centurion named Cornelius who has had a vision from the Lord and feels drawn to the Christian faith. Before the meeting takes place, Peter has a vision in which a large sheet comes down from the heavens. On the sheet are all the animals the Lord has made. When Peter is instructed to pick one of the animals to eat, he tells the Lord he cannot eat as some of these creatures are considered unclean. A voice asked, “If God made these animals, how can they be unclean?” This goes on for three times until the sheet ascends back up.

The event seems out of sync until Peter is called to visit the centurion who tells him about the vision from the Lord to bring Peter to speak to him about the Christian faith. When Peter and his fellow circumcised believers arrive at the house, they are convicted by the Spirit about what they thought was once unclean. For Peter, it all clicks as he realizes God was translating to him how he considered those who were Gentiles as unclean due to being uncircumcised. And in doing so, Peter and others have deemed who is and who is not acceptable to the Christian faith.

Yet this will only be the beginning for Peter. When he returns to Jerusalem, he has to explain to the church what happened. Folks are upset and accuse him of breaking protocol as he eats with the uncircumcised. It leads to questions of table fellowship: did Peter violate the Lord’s Supper by sharing with such an individual? Peter is undeterred and explains his vision and the connection to it all. The real “hero” of the story though is not Peter or Cornelius but God who makes promises and keeps them, finding a way amid human distinctions and partiality between people.<sup>1</sup> For those who may critique, Peter states about how if God gave Cornelius the belief in Jesus Christ, who is Peter to stand in God’s way? It is a reminder of how repentance is an act of God’s grace.<sup>2</sup> God is the one who turns towards us and who are any of us to deny what God can do in another person’s life?

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William. “Acts.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 100.

## **Application**

When we think of the word “clean,” we can probably conjure up many different things. Some of us think of spring cleaning where we go through our house or garage and purge things we no longer need. As a runner, I love becoming clean after a run with a hot shower to feel prepared for the day. We tell children to join the “clean plate club” by encouraging them to eat everything put in front of them. Clean can have many different connotations depending on who you ask and what is put in front of you.

Clean was a little different in the ancient world. Before mass wide sanitation was a thing, most of the world Jesus lived in was not “clean.” Yet one thing to distinguish those who were in the Jewish tradition was a focus on “clean” animals they could eat as per instruction in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. There was both a dietary and religious component to what one puts in their bodies and there are some Jewish branches who still observe as much today.

Yet as with any religious staple, there can be a temptation to turn both dietary and religious components into qualifiers for belonging. Thus, we come to the issue in the early church where the conversation of what is “clean,” has less to do with food and religious observance and is becoming more about matters of belonging and who God can work through. Through Peter’s vision and speech, God makes the audacious claim of how God will choose to whom God will give grace and how belief is a gift not just for who humans deem as clean. It is God who does the saving and redemption of humanity and not us.

Sometimes I think these chapters of Acts get overlooked in church teaching and preaching today because they make us uncomfortable. The odds are if we were to sit in Peter’s position to the church in Jerusalem, we would discover some of the same traps which were in the early church. Many of us like the idea of knowing who is clean and who is unclean. And then we draw a wagon circle around our definitions, potentially finding the scriptures to support our arguments. Instead of God being the one to extend grace or judgment, we put ourselves in the frontline position.

As I was reflecting on this scripture, I thought of some pivotal conversations my Dad gently had with me when I was in middle and high school. Occasionally, I would make derogatory comments about people based on external looks or things they did. In one particular moment when I made a snide comment about some folks, my dad asked me if I knew about the family dynamics or why those people did what they did. I had nothing. Without betraying confidences, he shared with me of some of their struggles and their background. They had faced incredible challenges I knew nothing about and only by the grace of God had they been able to move on and keep going. I felt convicted to think a little more carefully before I deemed who was clean or unclean before the Lord. God reminded me of how God had not just made me and others who looked and thought like me, God had made all sorts of people, and all are “clean” because they are God’s children just like me.

One of my wisest lay leaders tell me how much she loves the United Methodist Church because we understand how God’s grace is so beautiful and so much bigger than we can imagine. God’s grace is central to the Christian faith regardless of denomination because it is God’s gift to humanity. Grace changes how we see people. Grace changes us as we realize when we sin or mess up, God is already there before we tell God the things God already knows we did. Grace challenges us because it is not something we can earn, and it is not something we can control. Grace is a beautiful gift, and it also reminds us of how God makes all things clean.

Lately in the past several years in the Christian faith, I have seen true ugliness come out in who is clean and unclean before the Lord. What I continue to struggle to understand is how we

think we need to control these conversations as it is ultimately God who will sort everything and everyone out. Much like Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation," I think God's kingdom and the heavens will open and we will all discover our definition of clean and unclean is not the same as that of the Lord God. God is the one who makes all people and God is the one who is gives grace and redemption.

Why is it tempting in the Christian faith to deem who is clean and unclean before the Lord? How is grace tied to this passage and what God does with humanity? Who are people you have deemed as "unclean" in the eyes of the Lord? How have you seen God turn others towards the Lord? How have you experienced God's grace in your life?

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