

“When They Heard This, They Were Silenced”

Acts of the Apostles 11:1-18

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The text for today from the Acts of the Apostles is really a profound theological statement revealing something of the nature of God. If you've ever wondered, 'Who is God anyhow? And what does God have to do with me?' then this passage is for you. In this story of Peter's vision of a sheet crawling with unclean animals descending from heaven, God is doing a whole new thing. God is changing the boundaries; **God is including those who had previously been excluded.** If we had thought of God as resistant to change, as Peter had, we discover here that God has more light to reveal, that God is still speaking.

There had been a time when God had made a very exclusive covenant with Abraham and Sarah. But here we see God busting out of those narrow parameters, welcoming the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised, the Gentile as well and the Jew, those traditionally regarded as 'unclean' as well as those regarded as 'clean.' As word of this got out, that God was doing a new thing, the people in the churches were stunned! It says, "When they heard this, they were silenced!"

On March 1, 1960, we moved into our new house in Westfield, Massachusetts. Within a few hours, all six of us children had already made at least two new friends. That means there were about 18 of us racing around the downstairs play zone pedaling our trikes and pitching Whiffle balls when the man came to install the telephone. According to the family's oral history, the service man asked my mother, 'Are all these yours?' She is said to have replied, 'Every one of them!'

It was as if she had lost count and that it didn't matter anymore what your name was or how old you were or who your real parents were. On that day, everyone was counted as belonging to one family. The telephone installer left scratching his head, wondering what the world was coming to!

As Peter comes out of his reverie, out of his trance, having witnessed the sheet with the unclean animals and the voice of God commanding him to 'take and eat,' he, too, is wondering what is the world coming to. Gentiles? Even Gentiles are included in the circle of God's love? Gentiles in the covenant of God's beloved?

This event had an immediate impact on Peter and on the emerging church. This event caused everyone to ask him or herself, 'who else have I considered to be unclean, who is it God is calling me to consider in a new way, to no longer consider as unclean?'

Personally, I find this text to be constantly challenging, constantly nudging me toward an ever more inclusive attitude. This is one of those passages that is meant to keep us up at night reflecting on our relationship with today's "unclean" populations, however our culture might name them.

Most of you know I have a life-long passion for the poetry of Robert Frost. I've seen in his verse how he opens up the eternal truths, how he confronts me with mystery, how he invites me to taste the sacred. This poet from Vermont who read at the inauguration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is never more than an arm's reach from my office chair. But lately, I have been drawn to the poetry of Martin Espada, a second generation Puerto Rican, born in Brooklyn, New York. A professor at the University of Massachusetts for nineteen years, Martin Espada knows other truths that never occurred to Robert Frost, has a different slant on life; maybe never swung a birch tree down to the ground, but knows what it feels like to be regarded with suspicion;

never heard the horses giving their harness bells a shake to ask if there is some mistake, but has heard the stinging language of rebuke on the street, the language that crushes the soul.

I need Robert Frost and I need Martin Espada. Without them both, I don't have access to the whole truth. I thank God for sending me a vision of a sheet descending from heaven with a Puerto Rican poet upon it and a voice saying, 'Ricardo, take and read about life from a different point of view.'

I find it of great interest that the author of the Acts of the Apostles is Luke, a physician by vocation. Luke not only knew about Peter's vision, but he chooses to include it twice in the Acts of the Apostles! Twice! Once in chapter 10, once in chapter 11. I can't think of any other story in all of Scripture that appears twice in the same book! I am certain that this means the incident with Peter and the sheet crawling with unclean animals forever colored the way Luke understood God and what God had to do with him!

If we could look at Luke the physician before and after the vision of the unclean animals we would see a big difference in the way he conducted his medical practice. I am guessing the vision kept him up at night. For he could see that the vision was not just for Peter's sake; it was for his own sake and for the sake of future generations. I imagine Luke reflecting on his medical practice and waking up to the sobering truth that he has limited his practice to those patients with the proper surname, with the proper religious orientation, with the proper papers. Now he sees that he is not to show partiality, that he is to treat everyone with a wound, everyone with a fever, everyone with a broken bone.

I think of Dr. Earle who was doctor to many of us in South Glastonbury in the 1950's. I think he may have been acquainted with Peter's vision. He'd make house calls wherever there was a fever or a pregnancy or a migraine.

He'd show up with his black bag and his wisdom and his stethoscope, and he'd depart with a fee paid for services rendered, but often the fee was in the form of a dozen eggs from the patient's chicken coop or an apple pie from the patient's oven or a gallon of milk from the cow barn. Receiving in-kind fees was his way of being accessible to the whole community.

Peter sees a vision and he 'gets it' that God is opening doors that had never been opened before. And the Good News is not just about broadening the reach of Peter's embrace; it's about broadening the reach of my own embrace and your own embrace. Peter's vision alters forever our understanding of God. If God can welcome the one deemed by the dominant culture as 'unclean,' then I guess I can, too! This is how the vision of the sheet descending from heaven was speaking to me this week, and as always I share it with you in the greatest of hope. Amen!