

Open Table Fellowship
Acts 11:1-18
May 2, 2010

I took my cats in for their annual physical the other day and got to talking with my vet about the best cat food and diet for my pets. She gave me her opinion about her favorites, then referred to something called the “catkins” diets.

I thought I had misheard, but when I asked her to repeat herself, she said, “That’s right—it’s the same thing as the Atkins diet, very high in protein. The catkins diet!”

Well, why not! If diets are good enough for humans, I suppose they’re good enough for the animals in our families whom we treat like humans, right?

Have any of you ever tried a particular diet, like the Atkins or South Beach or Special K? Many of us have, mainly for the purpose of controlling our weight.

But as most of us know, many of the world religions observe specific diets as a part of their faith practices. Hinduism avoids meat from cow, water buffalo, yak, and other specified animals. Many Buddhists believe the prohibition, “Thou shalt not kill” includes not only human, but animals, too, and therefore will eat no meat.

Truthfully, Christianity is one of the only faiths of the major world religions that doesn’t have a strict dietary law for its adherents. Well, that’s not totally true. We know that during Lent, our Catholic brothers and sisters certainly eat fish on particular days during the season.

But our text this morning is a pivotal one, an earth-shaking Word that changed not only the way the early Christians ate, but also the people with whom they ate. It is a powerful Word that continues to reverberate in our hearts today, calling us to remember God’s original creative intention for the world.

To understand the drastic change this text relates for Peter and the early disciples, we have to first know what they considered to be the literal truth, the law of God. Please open your Bibles to third book in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the book of Leviticus, chapter 11, found in your pew Bibles on page _____. Let's read a little bit of this to get the flavor of what God is doing in our text from the Christian Scriptures today. (read a piece)

This was the law of God and of the land in which Peter lived. He made sure that not a single shrimp or piece of bacon ever passed his lips. He tried his best to abide by these Levitical codes so as to honor God and be a good citizen to his nation.

But one day, God gave Peter a vision. You heard the apostle tell about it when he was called before a courtroom of his peers. They accused him of breaking the sacred laws by eating unclean food with unclean people.

Our text from Chapter 11 of Acts this morning relates Peter's defense. It was based on a vision, a revelation from God.

He had the vision while staying at the seaside beach house of Simon the Tanner's, which was already an iffy situation in itself. True, Simon was a Jew, but he was not Orthodox! Just look at his choice of profession! He was a tanner, who touched carcasses to skin their hides and prepare them for use as furniture or clothing or shoes. Everyone knew that made Simon unclean, and Peter probably shouldn't have been staying there in the first place.

Anyway, it was about lunch time, and Peter was on Simon's roof praying when a vision came upon him. In his vision he saw a large sheet unfurled from heaven to earth, and within that sheet were all of these animals listed in the part of Leviticus we just read. Peter heard a voice telling him to eat them, and he assumed rightly that it was the Lord's.

Peter's initial thought was that God was testing his faithfulness. Would he break the law? Peter stood tall in his faith and said, "I will not, Lord, for

nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” Two more times the food was offered to Peter, who wasn’t about to break the law of the Lord.

Finally, the Lord said to him, “Peter, all that God has created is clean! You shall not call it common.”

Stunned, Peter was still trying to take this paradigm shift in when three men arrived from Caesarea. He could tell they were goy—that is, not Jewish.

But the same voice that urged him to eat forbidden food then urged him to accompany these goy guys to their place of residence. As he left he was joined by a posse of disciples who went to protect him.

They were met by Cornelius, a well-to-do soldier, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, who explained to Peter and the disciples that he had had a vision of his own in which he saw an angel standing in his house, commanding him to send for Peter for the purpose of offering salvation to him.

Peter told the court how he had responded to Cornelius. In Acts 10:34, he said, “Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

And as he began to share the story of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his entire household. Chapter 10:45 relates the shock of the moment: “And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.”

And Peter baptized them immediately.

Peter concluded his defense with this statement from this morning’s scripture: “I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then, God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I should withstand God?”

Friends, we can't imagine how earth-shaking, belief-shattering this was for those early Christians still entrenched in the teachings of Moses they had practiced for centuries. Not only did this change the menu of their diet, it changed the way they dealt with people who before that point were considered untouchable—anathema.

Or maybe we can imagine it, because every generation has their untouchables from whom we separate ourselves. Every generation must open our ears to hear the word of the Lord saying, "What I have created, I have made clean."

Of course, as I prayerfully worked on this scripture for this sermon throughout the week, I was confronted daily with the news about those in our midst who are of Mexican descent. My former state of Arizona has set off a national knock-down, drag-out debate on how we are to treat those whose home nation is to the south.

Trust me. After having lived in that desert state for almost 15 years, I understand the complexity of the situation. I understand how fearful the ranchers are who live on the border, whose lands are traversed by those illegally entering our country—and how the death of one of those ranchers by one of those crossing his land is what triggered the state government to pass the recent legislation to try and gain some control of the chaos. I understand that our medical system is burdened by those immigrants who are ill and have no insurance. And there are numerous other problems we could list here this morning.

I'm not going to speak to the law itself this morning. I have trust in our government that eventually we will work out the details of how to wrangle with the legality of those who have been in this country working without the benefit of green card or citizenship.

But I do want us to take a look at how we may be tempted to use that law to set apart an entire race—or anyone who looks like they might be of that race—to treat them as unclean.

“What I have created, I have made clean,” God said to Peter.

I overheard someone blowing off steam yesterday that he had gotten stopped for speeding. He was asked for his identification and proof of insurance—as we all are when we break the laws of the road. But then he began to rail about the fact that people were upset because Mexicans who are here illegally shouldn’t be asked for their id.

What he doesn’t get is that he got stopped because he broke the law. Arizona’s new legislation, which is being seriously considered by other states, says that anyone who LOOKS like they may be illegal can be stopped, simply by the hue of their skin! They may have been citizens of this nation for generations, but they can be stopped and checked for no other reason than their color.

That’s the part that disturbs me greatly. I don’t mean to pick on my former state even more, but I remind us that it was in Phoenix after 9/11 that a Sikh Indian man, wearing a turban, was shot and killed in retaliation for the bombing of the twin towers. He was neither of the religion of the bombers, nor of the same nation, but because he looked middle eastern that he was murdered.

Peter’s vision shook the early Christian church to its very core when his dream presented a vision of an open table set for everyone who believed in the God preached by Jesus Christ—regardless of nationality or whether they had had a bris or not. The apostle Paul threatened the societal structures of his community when he preached that there is neither “Jew nor Gentile, Male nor female, slave nor free” in the realm of God.

We, who have inherited the mantle of both Peter and Paul must continue to set an open table of welcome for those who come to us, those, who like Cornelius, seek salvation—either for this life or the next. We must work for justice in our world—definitely supporting the punishment of those who perpetrate violence on others, in whatever form that comes, whether the

illegal drug trafficker or the hot-headed patriot. But we must also be hospitable, welcoming, compassionate to the wayfarer, the sojourner.

Peter knew that by baptizing Cornelius and his household that he would be in hot water with church leaders who still clung to the laws of Judaism. But he couldn't get away from the voice of God, the word of the Lord, "What God has created, God has made clean."

And so Peter and those early Christians set a place at the table for those they had previously shunned and scorned. And so we, who are Christians of today, offer an open table to all who hunger for the love of God and the hope in Jesus Christ, an open table fellowship with all peoples of all nations, for whom, like Peter, we are called to speak out.

In a 1971 interview, the German theologian Martin Niemoller repeated his famous quote he first uttered in 1946 after being released from Dachau:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I did not speak out;
As I was not a communist.
When they locked up the social democrats,
I did not speak out;
I was not a social democrat.
When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
As I was not a trade unionist.
When they came for the Jews,
I did not speak out;
As I was not a Jew.
When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

May we, with Christ as our guide, set an open table, where nothing or no one is unclean in His sight.

Amen.