

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, May 15, 2022

Text: Acts 11:1-18

Title: "Peter, You Got Some Splainin To Do"

What is the first thing you think of when someone comes up to you and says, "We need to talk"?

You think, "Now what did I do?" Oh great. I am in trouble. I know when Jeranna, my spouse, calls at work and says, "I need to talk to you later" my first reaction is "What is it?" Why can't we talk now? Is it bad? Now what?

Isn't that the way our brain works? We always jump to the worst possible conclusion.

This is what happens in our first reading for today from the book of Acts. The Apostle Peter is called back to the home office of the Christian church in Jerusalem to answer the question, "Why are you eating with the uncircumcised men?" In other words, as a Jewish person who had strict purity rules around eating and food, why Peter was sharing table fellowship with non-Jews... with Gentiles?

I am fond of calling our first lesson from Acts 11 the "The I love Lucy Text" Remember when Ricky got home from work, you know back in the day, and Lucy had this sheepish look on her face and see some sort of mess, he would say, "Lucy, you got some 'splaining to do."

Peter is out in the Gentile territory of Joppa, the coastal playground for Roman Soldiers, proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He had just raised Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead. And prior to our lesson for today, Peter had a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven with every living creature on it. And the message from God was, "Peter, get up, kill and eat... everything I made is clean.

This would be a complete turnabout in thinking for Peter. Jews only ate certain things. Peter protested.

This message of all things are clean, obviously led Peter to accept an invite to a Roman Centurion's house, Cornelius. Cornelius was a

Gentile, non-jew. And during dinner, Peter got up and told the story of Easter... of how Jesus rose from the dead.

Then the Holy Spirit fell on the whole lot in Cornelius home and they believed and were baptized on the spot. This is known as the Gentile Pentecost in Acts. =

Peter was taking his call seriously to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth starting in Jerusalem.

And the home office was concerned with who Peter was eating with. He shared his vision yet again and fortunately the powers that be believed that this was God's doing and not Rogue Peter going outside the plan. He said, "Who was I to hinder God."

You see, the Holy Spirit orchestrated the whole thing. Through a vision of inclusion and the receptiveness of the Gentiles hearing and believing the Word about Jesus death and Resurrection, God worked faith in the Gentiles too. This is good news for us who are non-Jewish.

This text has always fascinated me because it calls us out of our little homogeneous enclaves to become more inclusive... to go and eat with people who are different from us. To welcome the stranger. To listen to their story. To share the message of Jesus in word and deed without worrying about the outcome. The Holy Spirit will do what it will.

I like how Peter didn't let his past thinking about Gentiles inform his future. He listened to the Holy Spirit's guidance and got up and went to Cornelius' home. This takes a lot of guts.

We have work to do as individuals and as a church to keep pushing these boundaries of who is included. The easy way is to pull back into our comfortable groups.

Some of my greatest memories of ministry this year involve meals. I ate a meal in Guatemala with the families we were helping to build a home. The fried chicken and fries were OK. But watching people devour fried chicken and fries was amazing.

I was invited to a meal at the Afghan family's new home we are accompanying with our Good Neighbor Team at church. I tried some

lamb, which I don't like. But I will never forget trying to sit on the floor around an amazing spread of food... and eating more and more.

After church on a Saturday, you know the night our parking lot was filled, I wandered into the Hispanic AA group's annual sobriety celebration in our gym to say hi after church. They gave Eli and I a plate of tacos and rice that was to die for. Their hospitality around food was unmatched.

Each one of those times I felt like I was standing on Holy Ground.

This food thing... there is something to it.

As a church, I want to continue to push the boundaries of inclusion. We also need to repent from our past when we blindly exclude people without even knowing it. We need to go out like Peter and hang out with people we don't normally know and let the Holy Spirit guide our steps.

Today you are invited to the table of the Lord. All are welcome. Jesus never turned anyone away. In fact, Jesus had open commensality at his meals. In communion we too are given the repentance that leads to life. Our past sins are forgiven. We are called to go out and love as we have been loved.

And May this story of the Holy Spirit pushing the boundaries of the church be our story... so someone can call us and say, "Church on Commercial Street in Neenah, you got some 'splainin to do."