

Peter's Report to the Church at Jerusalem

11 ¹Now the apostles and the believers^a who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers^b criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.^c These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then 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?” ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” ¹

^a Gk *brothers*

^b Gk lacks *believers*

^c Or *not to hesitate*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Familiarity, Community and the Holy Spirit

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: May 9, 2004

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Acts 11:1-18*

Like the ripples from a stone thrown in a pond, Christianity spread out from its home base in Judea. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, after the disciples gathered their wits about them, after the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, after the persecutions of the early church began in Jerusalem, fledgling Christianity began to spread like ripples in a pond. It spread especially to the north and to the west, first to Antioch, then to Collosse and Ephesus, then to Phillipi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Athens, and finally it spread to Rome.

The history is complex. Most historians today tell us that there were many versions of the new faith – to say Christianities is more accurate than to say Christianity. Even the record we have in the Bible suggests a multiplicity. We have four Gospels, each with its own differing version of things, and we also know that there were many other texts, not in the Bible, that would tell the story differently, too. But one thing seems clear. When Christianity, or Christianities if you prefer, spread out of Judea and into the environs of the Mediterranean basin, when Christianity grew from being a small denomination within Judaism to a growing religious movement in the larger geography of the Roman Empire, it found itself embracing those whom it had up until then seen as outsiders. That is, as Christianity spread to the cities outside Judea, those whom the Judeans had called *ethnos*, or the Gentiles, or even the unclean, joined the new faith in significant numbers.

Here, early in the book of Acts, we find ourselves in the resulting crossfire. It had been hard for the Jerusalem Christians to accept Gentiles into the faith, for the Jerusalem Christians feared they would be polluted by the unclean outsiders. At first, though, non-Jews who converted to Christianity essentially became Jews. They were circumcised, and they adopted the Jewish purity laws, including the dietary laws. But very soon people, especially the apostle Paul, began to claim that there was no need for a Christian to become circumcised or adhere to the Jewish holiness codes.

As we look back at this historical moment, perhaps our easiest and greatest mistake is to scoff at the Jerusalem Christians, to think of them as rigid legalists, to trivialize their concerns. For their concerns were born not primarily out of rigidity, but out of a strong sense of community. If we are to understand their historical moment, and for that matter ours, we must fully appreciate this desire for community and identity.

By the time of the birth date of Christianity the Jews had for many centuries been a people on the edge. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and finally the Romans had ruled them, sometimes harshly and sometimes benignly. But always the Jews were ruled, and always the fear was that they would lose their identity. Over time the religious rite of circumcision and the purity codes that they followed became the mark and the guarantee of Jewish identity. These signs held the anxiety of absorption, or loss of identity, at bay.

And one does not need a history of subjugation to be concerned about community and

identity. Indeed, contemporary examples abound. The current debate in the United States over whether Spanish speaking children ought be required to give up their Spanish and be immersed in English has many facets to it, but not the least of these is a debate over what it means to be an American. On both sides of the fight are strong feelings about issues of identity.

This morning we celebrate Mother's Day, and that gives us opportunity to reflect on the bonds of family identity. I recall when I was a brand new husband. At the first Mother's Day with my in-laws everyone said my mother-in-law was the best mother in the world. And I wanted to shout out that they were all wrong, for though I loved my mother-in-law, I knew for a fact that my mother was the best one in the world. It was about family bonds and loyalty and identity.

And while we're on fanatical subjects, how about those Red Sox? Now there's a loyalty and identity issue for you. One of our faculty members at the Divinity School is from New York, and he says that he's learned never to mention the Y word in Boston. In Boston it is the rare and may I say despicable person who is a Yankees fan. Maybe that's the sort of thing the early Jerusalem Christians were feeling. Maybe it was like some of the Yankees decided they wanted to be Red Sox, but they wanted to keep on being Yankees. They wanted to keep wearing the Yankees pinstripes, and that awful blue hat with the N and the Y on it. And they wanted to bring George Steinbrenner with them. Imagine! If you are a Red Sox, then you are Red Sox completely, 100%, and forever, too. I mean, doesn't it just irk you when that bum Roger Clemens says he wants to go into the Hall of Fame in a Yankee uniform? What kind of baloney is that?

*** It was far more serious and a lot less humorous situation, but these feelings aren't far from the ones that the early Jerusalem Christians had for the Gentiles. They referred to the Gentiles as the unclean. They believed that they would pollute the pure ones.

And it is here that we see the dark side of loyalty to the bonds of community and the dark side of loyalty to the marks of identity. The rhetoric of community and identity can become venomous. Especially when the logic of identity takes on the cloak of religious sanctity, it may become a deadly poison. For armed with self-righteousness, armed with the idea that one's contempt for another is approved, even demanded by God, there is little deterrent from hostility, and certainly no motivation for a welcoming embrace.

It is terribly important to note that this crisis as it is related in the book of Acts has its roots in religious loyalty, and religious loyalty backed up in a very particular way. The Jerusalem Christians look to the Bible for their guidance. It is from the Bible that comes the mandate for circumcision, from the Bible that comes the dietary codes. The Jerusalem Christians are appalled that Peter would have baptized the uncircumcised and that he would have eaten with the unclean. What started as a way of preserving community and identity turns into something more sinister.

Of course the very same religious logic obtains in our time. There are people who will point to a small handful of verses in the Bible and tell you that those verses, those words from God, are why they believe that homosexuality is an abomination, and why they believe that same sex marriage will be the downfall of the moral fabric. They look at a few other verses and suggest that from them they know that the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ, and that the Buddhists, and the Hindus and the Jews, and anyone else you want to name are headed to the fires of hell. First of all, most people who read the Bible this way read it incredibly selectively.

That is, they ignore the verses, often the far greater number of verses that say the opposite of what they want to believe. But even if they were dead right about what the Bible says, today's passage from the Bible itself is a witness against using the Bible as an authority to bolster identities and loyalties, against using the verses of the Bible as a way to separate the people we like into the good pile and the people we don't like into the bad pile, against reading the Bible as a handbook for deciding who is in and who is out.

In this text from Acts, the Jerusalem Christians correctly point to the Bible's mandates for keeping the dietary codes and the rite of circumcision. In this case there is no ambiguity in the text. And Peter responds that he felt the same way, but then God sent him a vision. In the vision he sees a bunch of unclean animals. And God directs Peter to kill and eat them. And Peter, perhaps thinking that God is testing him, says, "Oh no, God. Nothing unclean has ever touched my lips or entered my mouth, and I'm not going to begin now." And God answers Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean." What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.

Then Gentile messengers came to Peter. The Holy Spirit directed Peter to make no distinction between them and himself. That is, the Holy Spirit instructed him not to call the Gentile men unclean but instead to accompany the messengers to the house of the Gentile who had sent them. And there the Holy Spirit fell on the man and his household, Gentiles all. The text says that the Holy Spirit fell on them in exactly the same way that it fell on the disciples themselves on Pentecost.

Peter turns to the Jerusalem Christians and says to them, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" Who was I that I could hinder God.

The Jerusalem Christians were silent for a moment, and then they responded, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. Often you will hear that it means to turn around, to change. But the force is actually even stronger than that. *Metanoia* means "to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude."² In the Christian message, God has given the Gentiles the complete change in thought and attitude that leads to life. It is, no doubt, why they are so compelled by it. In this passage the Jerusalem Christians also experience their own *metanoia*, for it finally dawns on them just how life changing, as well as life giving, is this faith they are following. It finally dawns on them that this faith, by its very nature, must cause them to utterly transcend the old worn out notions of community and identity, the old worn out notions of insiders and outsiders, the old worn out notions of using the Bible to call abomination that which God has made clean.

In this new faith, the Christian faith, God means to broaden the circle of the acceptable. God challenges us to find our identity and community in a broader inclusiveness. God tells us that attention to the generosity of the Holy Spirit will keep us from reading the Biblical text wrongly and narrowly. And God tells us loudly and clearly that we have no business calling unclean what God has made clean. In the end, God invites us into *metanoia*, into a complete change of thought and attitude. God invites us, in short, into life, for God gives us that *metanoia*

²Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.)* (Vol. 1, Page 509). New York: United Bible societies.

that leads to life. Thanks be to God. Amen.