

## **What God Called Clean**

May 15, 2022

### **Acts 11:1-18**

<sup>1</sup>Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup>So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup>saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” <sup>4</sup>Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup>I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup>But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ <sup>9</sup>But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ <sup>10</sup>This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

<sup>11</sup>At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup>The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. <sup>13</sup>He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup>he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ <sup>15</sup>And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup>And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

*<sup>17</sup>If 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?” <sup>18</sup>When 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.”*

### Revelation 21:1-4

*<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup>he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”*



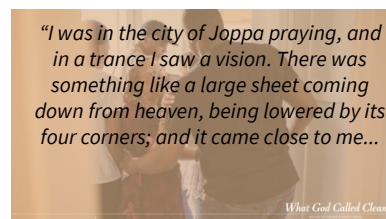
Today we continue to explore our faith through God’s work in Peter’s life as the early church begins to develop and grow. Last week was all about community, connection, relationship and how important they are to our lives and to our faith. The challenge last week was to consider whose door you might need to knock on, offering forgiveness that could lead to restoration or reconciliation or renewal. Perhaps this was hard to do. Perhaps it was something that you knew needed done and you just needed a little encouragement. I hope that God was able to work in and through you.

This week in our passage from Acts 11, we look at who is to be included, at who is worthy of belonging to the family of God. The Holy Spirit pushes the church to go wider than it ever had been before. I believe that's been the story ever since, asking the church itself and us as disciples, how do you love more, better, wider? As we begin to look at God's widening love, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin, please turn with me to Acts 11. What we are working from today is really Peter telling the church in Jerusalem what had happened in Joppa and Caesarea, the home of Cornelius the Roman centurion. The actual story happens in Acts 10, right after Peter's encounter with Tabitha and her community of faith. As our story begins, we see that the *"circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"* Peter had this vision, this encounter with God, in chapter 10 and he began to live out what God had told him in the vision. This creates some conflict with other church leaders in Jerusalem. The circumcised believers confront Peter about going into the home of an uncircumcised man – a Roman soldier no less – eating with him and his family, preaching to them. Peter, you interacted with that group of people? How could you!

Beginning in verse 5 Peter explains, step by step, what had happened. Read this part once again with me:

*"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.*



*As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'*

*"...As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'..."*

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From these words in verse 8, we can see that Peter still has some room to grow in his understanding of God's love. It jumps out at us here as he basically argues with God, saying, *"By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth."* These laws, these food guidelines, they are what Peter has known and followed for all of his life. How could they be 'wrong'? Can you hear the piousness in Peter? Can you sense his devout commitment to the Jewish faith? Continuing on we hear the rest of the vision and God's response to Peter's protests.

*But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.*

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*- Acts 11:5-10*

*What God Called Clean*

Peter's vision isn't really about the food that God declared clean - it's about people. And that makes it a bit messier.

Peter had a vision, he began to understand God's love a little better, and he began to live it out. This upsets folks back home in Jerusalem. To them he'd crossed the line. He had violated "church law". Peter's decision to follow the men who were sent from Caesarea, to go to the Gentile centurion's home,



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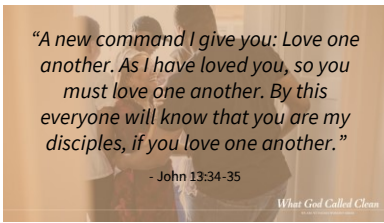
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*- Pastor John*

following the guide of the Holy Spirit, giving the message brought to him by the same Holy Spirit – that made no more sense to the church leader’s than the vision that Peter shared with them. As this conversation unfolded, I wonder how it went. Was it calm and logical? Or was it wild and emotional? When long held beliefs or understandings are challenged, what does that conversation usually look like? It is often wild and emotional. If you've been following news about our global church recently, it does not always look pretty. This conversation, this decision facing the early church - it was HARD. It required a radical shift in their theology. A huge change was being asked of them.

As it was within Tabitha's community last week, during this conversation bonds were probably broken, relationships were probably beginning to fray. Maybe one of the more devout, more orthodox Jewish Christians lobbed a "who do you think you are" or a "how dare you include..." accusation in Peter’s direction. Maybe there was an answer from Peter that sounded more like a justification than an explanation. It had to be a tense conversation as this new thing of God banged up against the ways the Jews and early church had always understood the limits of God’s love.

As I pondered the tenor and content of this discussion, the other words from this week’s lectionary came to mind. In John 13, verse 34 and 35, many of us read these words this week: *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*



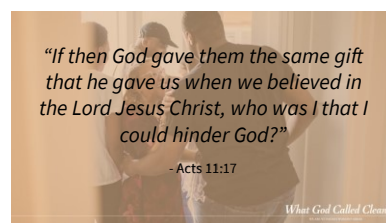
*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

- John 13:34-35

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I wonder, did those gathered with and against Peter remember these words of Jesus as they discussed this event, as they made this decision? And pertinent to us and to our church, do we employ this sentiment, do we apply these words in times of conflict or disagreement?

As we rejoin the story, Peter goes on, in verses 15 and 16, explaining the miraculous work that the Spirit did, falling upon Cornelius and his entire household, *“just as it had upon us at the beginning.”* What had happened to Peter and to those questioning him, the coming of the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost – it had just happened again, this time falling on Gentiles. Just as Jesus’ promise of his followers being *“baptized with the Holy Spirit”* was fulfilled at Pentecost, so too were these new believers recipients of a baptism by that same Holy Spirit.



And then Peter delivers this great line in verse 17, illustrating his growing understanding of the breadth of God’s love: *“If 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?”* With this question and humble admission – if God gave them the same gift, who was I to oppose God? – Peter silences those who had been questioning him. In response all begin to praise God for the gift given even to the Gentiles: the gift of repentance that leads to eternal life.

This huge change, this seismic shift about who the church was for, about who was welcome and worthy, it wasn't Peter's idea. It was God's idea. It was God's vision.

It was God who decided what was clean. Remember, Peter fought it initially – three times even! It seems that the other church leaders are convinced that this is really God at work, teaching them how to better be the church. These Gentiles, all those outside the Jewish faith, they were being filled with the same Holy Spirit.



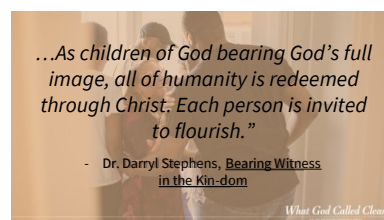
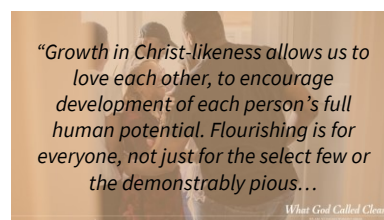
With this new understanding, the church began to spread out into the world outside the previous circle. The church will grow in leaps and bounds in the coming years. But the growth was probably not without growing pains. Change is always hard. In Peter's vision and in his interpretation of it he states, *"God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean"* (Acts 10:28). A little later, he says, *"I truly understand that God shows no partiality"* (Acts 10:34). Do not call anyone profane or unclean. God shows no partiality. My friends, neither should we. Peter and the early church leaders are beginning to understand that there are not some who are clean and acceptable, with that group over there still remaining outside the circle.

Even after Peter's vision and experience with the Holy Spirit falling on Cornelius and his household, was there still a person or a group that asked, "Well, yes, but what about that group over there?" If they are like me, and perhaps like you, that was probably a struggle some had. What about those people that wear those kinds of clothes? What about those that are that ethnicity or that live over there? These are questions that we may be tempted to ask. If the kingdom of God is growing and drawing others in, there will always be people who had never previously fit inside our circles who are now seeking admittance. Limiting anyone's access to the family of God is simply not practicing the radical hospitality that Jesus Christ modeled for us.

The truth is, my friends, radical hospitality does not ask questions about whether this group or that person should be admitted to the family of God.

In his book, Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship, Dr. Darryl Stephens defines Christ-like love this way:

*"Growth in Christ-likeness allows us to love each other, to encourage development of each person's full human potential. Flourishing is for everyone, not just for the select few or the demonstrably pious. As children of God bearing God's full image, all of humanity is redeemed through Christ. Each person is invited to flourish."*



These words echo the sentiment of God's vision shared with Peter and of Peter's experience at Cornelius' house. God's love led Peter to love a Gentile and his family. God's love compelled Peter to preach to the household, opening access to the fullness of God's love, manifest in the coming and in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This new life, this flourishing into new creations in Christ, it was not only for the Jews – the select few. All of humankind can be redeemed through Christ. All are invited to flourish, to experience new life in Christ. Through these God moments in Acts 10 and 11, the church and the apostles are beginning to open their hearts to all people everywhere. They are beginning to extend the good news of Jesus Christ to all people, leaning into the idea that what God called clean is really clean and worthy and acceptable.

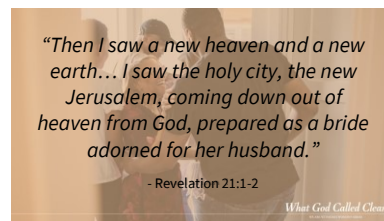




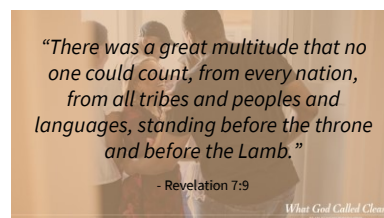
And even then, with these understandings starting to take root, the battle isn't over. Paul will have his turns being called on the carpet. Paul will be questioned about who he is adding to the church and about how he is doing so. Just as was the case with Jesus, people will continue to ask why he's eating with those people, why he's hanging out with those people.

Paul will also explain how it is always the Holy Spirit at work, not him. Just as Jesus would say, Peter and later Paul would say, these are not my words but the words of the one who sent me. The words are the words of the one who will one day make all things new.

Turn with me to Revelation 21 as we draw to a close. In verses 1 and 2 we read these words: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."* Like a bride adorned for her husband. It will be beautiful and amazing. It will be a time of great joy. God will *"wipe every tear from their eyes"* and *"death... mourning and crying and pain will be no more."* God will dwell among us, and we will worship and praise the Lord our God. This is the culmination of the vision laid out in our passage from Acts 11 today.



One day, when the new heaven and earth are created, there will be a great multitude gathered around the throne, worshipping the Lord our God. This multitude is described in Revelation 7, verse 9. Here we read, *"There was a great multitude that no one could count,*



*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*” This image of people from all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages – it mirrors what God said to Peter in our Acts 11 passage. God created us all, each and every one of us woven together as image-bearers of Christ Jesus.

What God has created is good; it is clean; it is worthy of belonging to the family of God now and of one day standing before the throne and before the Lamb in worship. As we go forth this day, seeking to be Christ in the world, may we see all people as worthy of the kingdom of God. And may you and I, as Christ’s ambassador in the world, may we allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us, drawing all into the family of God. May it be so this week. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As you reflect on the idea of God calling all things clean, what person or which group might you need to be more open to, more loving towards?
- 2) *Pray*. What way of understanding or long-standing tradition or belief might the Spirit be challenging in your heart? Pray for God’s guidance.
- 3) *Study*. Read Acts 15:1-20. How does the church deal with this next challenge to their theology and practice? How is this also practicing radical hospitality?