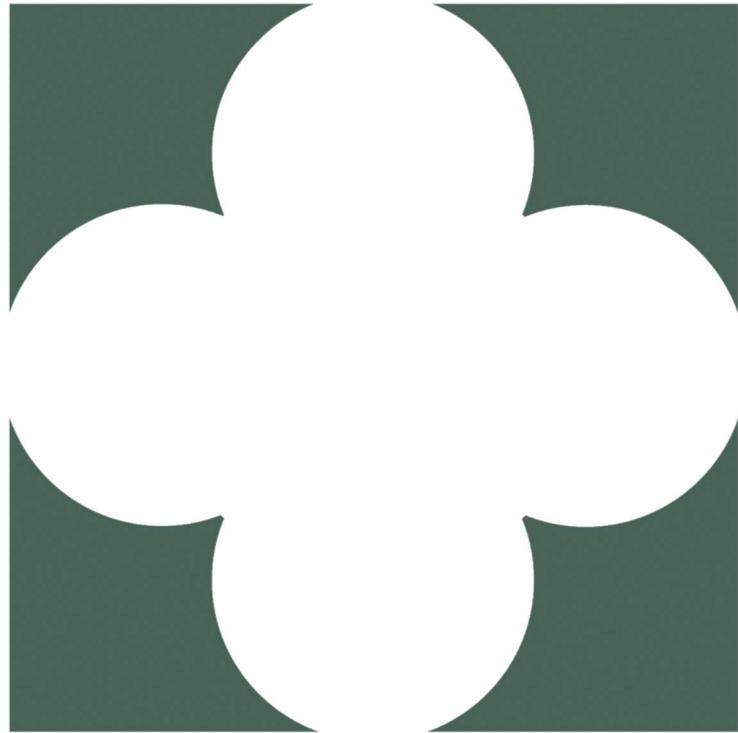


You Are Worthy

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Acts 11:1-10

The story of Peter and his vision of the sheet lowering and raising with all the forbidden animals in it, is my all-time favorite story in the Christian scriptures. As followers of the way of Jesus, there are a few stories in the New Testament, or I like to call them the Christian scriptures, that we need to know. We need to know the events of Holy Week. We need to know about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. And we need to know a bit about the fledgling church community that struggled—really struggled to get it right after Jesus' resurrection.

The scripture that Daryl read today is one of those stories we need to know and wrestle with as we grow in our faith. This story of Peter and the forbidden animals is told not once, not twice, but three times in the book of Acts. Anything mentioned three times in one book is clearly worth paying attention to.

In chapter 10 the author of Acts tells us the initial story of what happened to Peter. It's a rather involved story, so I will give you the CliffsNotes. Peter was in the city of Joppa at his friend Simon's house. Peter was on the rooftop waiting for lunch to be ready. He was very hungry as he waited, and he fell into a dream-like state thinking of food while on the roof. While in that in between place of being asleep and awake, he saw something like a large sheet coming down and going up to heaven.

In the sheet were all types of forbidden foods and animals according to the dietary laws of Peter's faith tradition. As the sheet came down, Peter heard a voice from heaven say, "**Rise Peter, kill and eat.**"

Peter said, no—I'm not going there. I've never eaten anything unclean and forbidden and I'm not starting now. The sheet went up and came down three times. Then Peter heard the voice from heaven say, what God has created clean, you must not call unclean. What God has created clean, you must not call unclean. To use Rev. Bonnie's example, just because you don't like Brussel sprouts, beets, asparagus, or liver, doesn't mean they are bad foods. What God has created clean, you must not call unclean.

Peter awakened from his dream and was totally perplexed at what this vision meant. He then went down to eat the meal that had been prepared for him. As Peter was eating three military men come to Simon's house asking for Peter and asking that he go with them to speak with their commanding officer, named Cornelius. These men were not of the same religious tradition as Peter.

We may think today, what difference would that make, but civil wars have been fought all over the world for centuries because of differing faith traditions. Catholics against Protestants in Ireland; Muslims against Buddhists in Myanmar; Muslim Uyghurs against

the atheist state in China; and indigenous practitioners against colonizers all over the world.

And it is not just those people over there who don't want to be in the company of others. Even among good church people in this country it happens. Baptist folks don't want to be with the Pentecostals. The Catholics don't want to be with the Latter-Day Saints, and the Jehovah's Witnesses don't want to be with the Unitarians. The progressives don't want to be confused with the conservatives. And some religious traditions have drawn a line in the sand of who is worthy to go into their sacred temples, and who is worthy to get into their section of heaven. So, it is not just those people who refuse to listen to what the Spirit said long ago.

To make a long story short, Peter went off with the men to see Cornelius. Cornelius believed in Jesus and followed his teaching, but he was Gentile. Up until this point in the growth of the church, it was believed that you had to be of the same religious tradition of Jesus. Which meant you first had to be Jewish.

As Peter was talking with Cornelius and sharing his testimony, Cornelius and family were filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and rejoiced in the Lord the same way all the believers rejoiced on the day of Pentecost. That meant everyone heard the good news of the gospel of Jesus in a language that they could speak and understand. Cornelius and family were caught up in the spirit and anointed in the Spirit just like those of Peter's faith.

Peter was shocked that those with whom the Jerusalem conservatives said not to associate, could be blessed by God just like he and his friends were. Peter had been taught that he and those like him had exclusive Spirit privileges that others did not have. But his eyes were telling him something different. His ears were telling him something different and his heart was rejoicing with these new believers.

The undeniable learning for Peter was that everyone was worthy of God's love and God's blessings. Your family background didn't matter. Your religious heritage didn't matter. Your social location didn't matter. Your gender didn't matter. And we can add today your sexual identity doesn't matter. All are worthy of God's abundant blessings.

You know, some learnings are harder to receive than others. Once a traditional belief is unmasked as a cultural bias and not a divine mandate, our hermeneutic of suspicion takes over from there. Once we realize cultural bias is way different from God's truth, we start to ask what else have we been taught that is untrue?

I was told growing up that God does not call women into ministry. I was told that from the pastor I most trusted and heard preach every week. Once I realized that was untrue. I wanted to know what else was I told in the name of Divine Truth that is actually cultural bias at best, and a lie if we really want to call a thing a thing.

Peter believed it was God's Truth that only certain people were favored by God and worthy of God's promises. Peter believed that only certain people could receive the Holy Spirit. Peter believed that only the real chosen believers could follow the way of Jesus. But, in that moment with Cornelius and his family, Peter knew what he once believed as the gospel truth was patently untrue.

Well, let me see if I can bring this thing a bit closer to home.

The second accounting of Peter's experience in Acts 11 is Peter being called on the carpet by the Jerusalem conservative religious authorities for breaking the dietary laws and eating with those people—those uncircumcised people. There were laws and consequences against such things. Peter how could you go against generations of tradition and our divine writings? Peter why would you intentionally disregard our religious laws?

As I read Peter's recounting of why he did what he did, I am reminded of Dr. King's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* written in 1963. Dr. King explained why he and the civil rights protestors were willing to break the law and go to jail for their right to equal accommodation, economic justice, and the right to be treated with dignity. In that letter Dr. King wrote,

There are just laws and there are unjust laws. King wrote, I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

My friends, some of the laws our conservative believers are preparing to enact are unjust laws. A woman's right to choose is a fundamental right in this country. A court cannot tell a woman if, when, and what type of birth control she can use.

The Supreme Court has upheld unjust laws before in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, where separate but equal was considered just treatment in this country. The Supreme Court has been wrong before and upheld unjust laws.

We must engage our hermeneutic of suspicion whenever one religious group impinges on the rights of another and then wraps their personal bigotry and hatred in Christian rhetoric. We must engage our hermeneutic of suspicion when loud exclusionary voices

encourage us to draw lines in the sand between those who are acceptable and those who are not.

Contemporary Theologian Lewis S. Mudge wrote that because of Peter's revelation:

Notions of clean and unclean as ways of separating people from one another are ruled antithetical to Christian faith forever, invalidating any attempt on our part to reinstate them in any form, ever again.

Peter's conclusion about God's divine acceptance and invitation into community was revolutionary. There is no longer us and them. As Dr. King wrote,

We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Lastly, after Peter explained God's inclusive invitation to the Jerusalem conservatives, there was silence. When the spirit is at work in our lives—there is nothing left to say. There was silence and then there was rejoicing.

When we grasp Divine Truth, and not just cultural bias it can be liberating. We are set free:

- From tradition and having to be in control
- From tradition and having to be right
- From doing it like we've always done it.
- From prejudices, stereotypes, and hatred
- From having it my way or the highway
- To show love and to reach out with open arms.
- To do something different; even revolutionary
- To hug, and hold, to lift-up, and set free,
- To rejoice with all creation that all are worthy and welcome in Christ Jesus. Yes, praise filled the room when those religious leaders realized they could let go of keeping people out and start inviting people in.

Friends we have a story to tell of God's inclusive love. We must tell others they are worthy of God's love, God's mercy, God's forgiveness, and God's grace. And when other voices try to drown out our message of inclusion, justice, and hope, we must keep telling our stories. Yes, when we embrace the inclusive love of God, all are worthy and all things are bright and beautiful.

Please join me in singing our closing hymn #31 *All Things Bright and Beautiful*.