

Sermon – October 29, 2023  
“God gave them the same gift”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 11:1-18

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people and through them ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

There are many moments in the first years of the growing body of Christ, the Church, in Jerusalem that I remember so clearly. When I think back on that time, I am amazed at how Jesus Christ led us through those days. One of the more memorable moments for me came when news arrived in Jerusalem that Peter, whom we held as one of the leaders of the Church, had eaten with Gentiles. I was among the Jewish believers living in Jerusalem then who heard the news of what Peter had done and we were shocked and frightened. We had known a time of peace and growth in the body of believers in Jesus in Jerusalem since Saul was transformed by Jesus and stopped persecuting the Church, but this news, that one of our leaders had eaten with Gentiles, when it got to the ears of the leaders of the temple in Jerusalem, had the potential to bring again the hand of persecution upon us. Those leaders might react very violently to the news that one of our leaders had broken the sacred food laws and eaten with those who are unclean. We also

heard that the word of God had been accepted by Gentiles, but the news that Peter had eaten with Gentiles was news that brought great fear into our hearts, into my heart. We recalled that our ancestors had been exiled to Babylon because they had not kept God's word. We knew the diligence of those who now watched over the temple in Jerusalem and feared how they might react to news that those who followed the Way now ate with unclean Gentiles who did not keep the Torah, God's Law. Even though we had been told the Gentiles had accepted God's word, and that was certainly good news, I wondered, "How could Peter, who is a leader of the apostles, go into a Gentile house and chance defilement? What would happen to the peace and respect we Jewish believers had built up with the nonbelieving Jewish community in Jerusalem and throughout Judea when they heard that Peter, one of the leaders of the Jewish believers in Christ, did not keep the laws God gave to us? Would we again be persecuted? Would they stop being tolerant of our following of Jesus? Would we also need to flee Jerusalem and Judea as the Hellenistic Jews had done?" The news of what Peter had done caused much anxiety and frustration among us and we waited impatiently for his return to Jerusalem so we might confront him and receive an explanation. We as a group wondered, "What could possibly justify such a break with our tradition and understanding of God's Law?" None of us could imagine anything that would give Peter justification for his action.

After months, I heard that Peter was on his way to Jerusalem, and the other apostles and believers planned to gather to confront Peter as soon as he arrived. When the day arrived, I went to the gathering so that I might also speak harshly to Peter about what he had done. I went to share in the criticism of an apostle of Jesus Christ who had eaten with sinners, unclean Gentiles, that he might be confronted with the breaking of the Law. My voice might be small in the forum but in my heart, I knew what Peter had done was wrong and in love I needed to confront him.

At the meeting Peter faced much criticism and harsh words over what he had done. Finally, one of the apostles asked him pointedly, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them<sup>i</sup>?" Even though there had been much harsh and pointed criticism of Peter, he was not offended. He listened to what we told him and heard our concerns in a calm and peaceful manner. He did not claim to be infallible in his understanding of Jesus nor in his leadership of the church. He did not become angry or defensive but listened to us all and then began to speak, telling us what had happened, step by step.

Peter said he was in Joppa in a time of prayer to God when he fell into a trance and received a vision from God. In that vision he saw something like a large linen sheet or sail held by its four corners coming down towards him out of the star-filled sky of heaven. The large linen cloth was lowered by its four corners and as it came down, it came close to him, close enough that he could look in and see what was within. He told us he could see in the linen cloth all kinds of animals. The examples of the animals he saw spanned all of the animals from God's creation and reminded me of the creation account from Genesis. What God showed him in the cloth represented all the animals of creation. The animals he saw were not only the ones that God had told us in the Law were clean and we could eat, but included animals that were forbidden for us to eat. Peter then told us he heard a voice. God spoke to him, telling him to "Get up from his prayer." God addressed him by name and said, "Peter; kill and eat."<sup>ii</sup> These seemed strange words to me to hear from God. I thought, "Why would God tell Peter to eat unclean animals? Why would God tell Peter to break the Torah?"

Peter told us that he objected to what God had asked him to do. I could understand his objection. We knew Peter. He had always been one who held to the Torah and the teaching of the rabbis. He would not eat many of these animals he was seeing as they were unclean. None of us could remember Peter ever eating anything unclean. That is what we Jews understood the Law taught us, and as Jews, we would not break the Law. We would rather die than eat what was unclean. Peter told us the voice from Heaven came again in response to his reply. God told him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane<sup>iii</sup>!" To kill and eat was a command from God. God was telling Peter these animals we had long held as unclean were clean. They were made clean by God, and Peter was not to hold them unclean. I did not understand why God would say such a thing. Why would God change the Law He had given us? Not eating that which God has told us was unclean is the way we had always tried to live, and now God was telling Peter that the part of the Law that addressed the eating of unclean animals He gave us was not the Law? What did this mean? I remember thinking, "Was what the rabbis had studied for centuries and helped us to understand not correct? Could it be that Peter was not talking with God?" Peter continued on with the telling of his account, sharing with us that this vision was repeated two more times. Three times he saw the sheet lowered with the animals clean and unclean. Three times he heard God speak to him, telling him to "kill and eat." And three times

God told him that “What God has made clean, you must not call profane<sup>iv</sup>.” Peter told us that after the third time the vision ended.

Peter did not need to explain to us that the repeating of this vision three times meant God was emphasizing something in the vision, The repetition meant God was pointing out something to Peter that he needed to grasp that he had not previously understood. It seemed as if God was changing His Law or maybe God was changing how we were to understand his Law. But I still wondered, how could God change His Law? What did God mean by this vision of eating unclean animals? God had spoken to Moses and told him these animals were not to be eaten. What did this new idea mean that “What God has made clean, we were not to call profane?” I was very troubled by what Peter was telling us.

And as I wondered about what this might mean, I heard Peter continue on with his account of what happened. He shared that at the moment the vision ended, three men from Caesarea, that great Gentile city built by Herod to honor Caesar, arrived at the gate to the house where he was staying in Joppa. When I heard this, I could only think, “What did the arrival of these three men mean? Why would three Gentiles come to Joppa looking for Peter? Did they come to offer Peter money? Why were they there?” Peter’s account grew stranger by the moment.

Peter told us that at the same moment when the men arrived, Holy Spirit told him two things: first to go with these men, these three Gentiles to Caesarea. And second, Holy Spirit told Peter to make no distinction between them and us. Peter was to make no distinction between Jews who believed in Jesus, sought to follow him, and to keep the Law, and Gentiles who did not keep the Law. We all knew Peter. We knew how sensitive he was to the speaking and leading of Holy Spirit in his life and how quick Peter was to obey. We had witnessed the results of Peter’s response to the arrival of Holy Spirit at Pentecost when Peter stood up to speak with great courage, being led by Holy Spirit to understand the tongues of fire and the speaking in tongues that we heard as fulfillment of what the prophet Joel had spoken in his prophecy. We knew that Peter had heard Holy Spirit guide him to speak to the crowds the words of God, and thousands of Jews accepted Jesus and began to follow him. We knew that Peter had heard Holy Spirit then and many times since. We could not doubt what he was telling us about Holy Spirit’s guidance even if what he was sharing threatened to change our understanding. Yet I wondered, “How could Holy Spirit tell Peter that we were to make no distinction between a Jew and an unclean Gentile

who broke God's Law? Gentiles didn't even know what God had decreed about clean and unclean foods. How could God accept those who were unclean as clean?" I remember thinking right away, "Peter will have to have some solid evidence for me to accept this change in God's Law." I remember thinking, "There is no way he can have evidence that will convince me that God makes no distinction between Gentiles and Jews. Holy Spirit always speaks in concert with God's word, not breaking it. Peter better be able to provide some real insight into his claim to show this is the word of God." I felt the spirit of criticism and anger rise up in me again.

Peter continued to talk and told us that he went with these three men back to Caesarea and that six Jewish believers went with him. Those six were with us in the room. I thought, "Well, whatever evidence he has, he will have plenty of witnesses to verify or deny what he says." Next, Peter shared that they arrived in Caesarea at the house of the Gentile who had sent for Peter and what happened there. The Gentile was a Roman centurion, one who feared God, but was not a Jew. He had not changed from a Gentile to a Jew by being circumcised and going through the rites necessary to become a Jew, a proselyte. Peter shared that the centurion had seen an angel who told him to send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter and told him he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved. Peter's story was getting more interesting by the moment. He wanted us to believe an unclean Gentile had seen an angel and had told him to send for Peter. Yet, the Gentile's words had a ring of truth. I realized that the Gentile asked for Peter by both of his names, the name Peter had before he met Jesus and the name Jesus gave him when he started to follow Jesus. I thought, "How could a centurion have known Peter's name from years ago before the Lord changed it?" We all called him Peter now. We never used Simon. For a Gentile so far from Galilee where Peter's name was changed to have known this detail about the one he sent for must have been a message from God if he knew both of Peter's names. How else would Gentiles in distant Caesarea know such a detail? I found it strange that an angel would speak to an unclean Gentile, but the evidence was there. Not only was Peter convinced by the words shared with him, he began sharing with all those gathered in the Gentile's home the Good News about Jesus Christ. I thought, "Wait, even sharing the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, still does not justify Peter breaking God's Law to eat with Gentiles." I was beginning to think Peter was wasting our time and that he was stalling to buy time or find a way out of the mess he had created.

Then Peter told us something that changed all of my thoughts, that ended my judgmental critical thoughts of him. Peter told us as he began to speak the word of God, as he began to share who Jesus Christ was with the Gentiles, Holy Spirit fell upon them just as he had upon us at the beginning. When Peter shared that with us, it immediately got very quiet in the room. All of the low-level murmuring about what Peter had done in the room stopped. We were to a person shocked to silence by what Peter just said. Holy Spirit had been poured out on unclean Gentiles. God had made unclean Gentiles clean through belief in Jesus Christ. God was making no distinction based on the food laws, but on what was in the hearts of believers, and those who believe in Jesus, even Gentiles, receive the gift of Holy Spirit, as we Jewish believers in Jesus had at Pentecost. There were the six men present in the room acknowledging that what Peter was saying was what happened: Holy Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles who believed in Jesus. God makes no distinction between Gentile and Jew. Those who believe in their heart receive Holy Spirit. God had made it plain, through the gift of Holy Spirit, that all people who believe in Jesus were acceptable to Him. While Peter was still sharing his account, my head was spinning, trying to understand what the giving of Holy Spirit to Gentile believers meant. Peter shared that he was led by Holy Spirit to remember Jesus' words. He told us he remembered that Jesus said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." I remember hearing Jesus speak those words as well. But I had never thought of them applying to Gentiles, only to Jews, those who knew God and followed His Law completely. Peter made one last statement that silenced my criticism of what he had done. He said, "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?" When Peter said this, it got completely quiet in the room. We were all thinking about what we heard, thinking about what God had shown Peter and what he had shared with us. Holy Spirit had said to make no distinction, Holy Spirit had been poured out on believing Gentiles as he had on Jews. God was making no distinction between Jew and Gentile; in Christ both are one. The witness of Jesus Christ had moved from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and now on to Casarea, to the first place in the Gentile world it would go. Jesus was on the move out to the ends of the earth. God had confirmed the inclusion of believing Gentiles in the kingdom of God with the gift of Holy Spirit. If we denied what God had done, we would be those trying to stand in God's path forward. Who am I to hinder God? Others in the room also began to understand. What had been angry sharp criticism over Peter's eating with Gentiles began to become praise for God giving to

Gentiles the repentance that leads to life. It was as if a veil that had kept my heart from accepting the possibility that unclean Gentiles could be followers of Jesus unless they learned to keep the Law in total was lifted and I saw that God makes no distinction between a Jew and Gentile. Those whom God has made clean through Jesus are clean and have received the repentance that leads to life. My heart was changed. The hearts of those in the room were changed from hearts seeking to criticize Peter for eating with Gentiles to those who were now praising God for what He was doing through Jesus even among unclean Gentiles. What God has made clean through Jesus' suffering, bleeding, and dying on the cross extends to the Gentiles. Those whom God sees as clean we were to accept as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We were to break bread with them. We who seek to follow Jesus have much to learn about this great love we have encountered. We have much to learn about what it means to make no distinction and to understand the cleansing power of Jesus Christ. May our eyes be opened and may we be given ears to hear and may we not be found hindering God.

*Pray with me. Jesus, we confess that too often we have stopped short of sharing your love with those we see as unclean based on what we see. Lord, open our eyes. Lift off the veils that keep us from clearly seeing our brother or sister and being your witness to all we meet and all you send us to with the Good News of Jesus Christ. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus, and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road.

Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 11:3 NRSV.

<sup>ii</sup> Acts 11:7 NRSV.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 11:9 NRSV.

<sup>iv</sup> Acts 11:9 NRSV.