

“I Had a Dream”

a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey

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Acts 11:1-11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ‘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.” 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. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.” And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.” 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 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.’

WHEN I FIRST READ THIS PASSAGE, I was reminded of a scene from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye needs to convince his wife Golde that their daughter should not marry the rich suitor, but should marry her penniless sweetheart. So he had a dream! In his “nightmare” Golde's grandmother returns from the grave to bless the marriage to the sweetheart. Further, formidable late wife of the rich suitor rises from her grave to warn, of retribution. The superstitious Golde quickly counsels the marriage of love. “I had a dream,” says Tevye.

I had a dream, said Peter. Foods were lowered down to me on a kind of heavenly picnic blanket and I rejected them-- I will not eat them in a boat; I will not eat them with a goat. I will not eat them here or there. I will not eat them anywhere...

Well, this vision may sound a little silly to us. But for Peter and the people to whom he described it, it was no laughing matter.

Peter’s aversion goes way beyond the “yuck” factor of (say) eating geckos, buzzards or mice. The sheet was not an affront to his taste buds, but to his piety. Remember, the beginning church was still a group of predominantly Jewish people. Keeping Torah had held them together as a people through the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, and all the pressures under Roman occupation. The command to kill and eat was a challenge to a boundary set by God, not by humans, and it was part of core beliefs that had shaped Peter’s life since earliest childhood.

Yet, explained Peter to the suspicious elders in Jerusalem, I did have a dream. And the Holy Spirit led me to go to uncircumcised men and eat with them. , and then, astoundingly, I saw the Holy Spirit descend on the whole household -- so what could I do but to baptize every last one of them? Who was I to think that I could hinder God?" Do not make unholy that which God has made holy. God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

We cannot underestimate the sea-change this was for the young church. No more partiality. God was opening the borders for the outsiders. There is no distinction, said Paul soon after, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And all have access to the overwhelming grace of God through Jesus Christ.

This call to no distinctions is one we will struggle with today. We might not use the terms clean or unclean but our society has its implicit purity codes, our own ideas about who is in or out, or more deserving or less deserving. Depending on your orientation, the unclean might be illegal immigrants, gays and lesbians, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans,. Blacks, Asians, people who shop at Safeway instead of the Farmers Market, people who carry guns, people who frequent Starbucks instead of Martha's, Capulets and Montegues.

Not only do we have these judgments about others, we generally align ourselves with one of the groups. Human beings are tribal and clannish by nature –We fix ourselves in groups that reinforce our identity, safety, and comfort. We gravitate least towards those who threaten our sense of well being, make us insecure, and rattle our sense of purpose in life. We live and think and act and coexist in community with those we believe share our values and views.

Yet, no distinctions, no partiality, means we are neither better nor worse than our brothers and sisters. We are simply unique, deeply unambiguously whole and unique individuals, creative and created beings. It is when we get over- identified with tribal loyalties that give away our inner wholeness.

I think this story, even the single verse “do not make unholy that which God has made holy,” helps us understand those often puzzling statements of Jesus:” Leave the dead to bury themselves.” “If any one comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, that one cannot be my disciple.” “It is not peace I come to bring but a sword.”

Sacrifice of our deepest loyalties may seem harsh and cruel – but it is the failure to distinguish our individuality from those to whom we are close that forces us into broken relationships and group mentalities. Do not hinder God means putting your relationship with God above all things – Before family, before work, before Rotary, before childrens' schools, even before church, we are God's. In order to honor that, we must honor our own identity within. From that strength, we can then relate creatively and positively to family and others, perhaps for the first time.

If you live out of that single deep self realization: that you are first and foremost a spiritual person, a true child of God; then your circle of relationships grows. We no longer confine ourselves to our own tribal group, but can respond to all persons, all kinds and types, without distinction. When we lose the collective consciousness that has often made our decisions for us; when we move into a direct communication with authentic being and commitment; then God's laws become written on our hearts rather than on stone tablets. And there is freedom.

I think an example of this is the advocacy group we support, Covenant Network. Of all the groups working for full inclusion in the Presbyterian Church, Covenant Network is the one who goes to the meetings of the Confessing Church and the New Wineskins and the conservative church alliances. And I believe that is at least one reason we have moved as far as we have toward LGBT inclusion. We have folks who are crossing lines and moving out of boxes, discovering their authentic selves and feeling stronger and more grounded in the world. It doesn't change their convictions as much as it opens up conversations and understandings and allows for the Spirit to move.

Who are we to hinder God? Who are we to pronounce judgment and live in separation?

The church itself has always struggled with this radical notion. The Lutherans and the Catholics fought about the pope. The Presbyterians and Methodists fought about how to govern a church. The Baptists and the Pentecostals fought about how much water was necessary for baptism. The denominational churches today fight, with the non-denominational churches about being "born again." For goodness sake, John Wycliff was the first person to translate the Bible into English, The Pope was so infuriated that 44 years after Wycliffe had died, he ordered the bones to be dug-up, crushed, and scattered in the river!

Peter and the apostles refused to remain in the box that others wanted them to stay in. Peter came out of the box to bring a message of love, power, and justice to people who didn't share his views which included both Jews and Gentiles.

We in this church are also coming out of our box: the box of spiritual confinement. The box of safety and comfort. With our massive building renovation, we are letting go of our tight identity with this building and all its quirks and demands. And we are opening ourselves to sharing space with two separate complex faith traditions

We are doing it because the Holy Spirit is moving us there; moving us beyond old boundaries, habits, and traditions; moving us to experience God in new and exciting ways Peter makes it plain: God sent Jesus into the world to reconcile all people unto God-self – even people who don't come to that through Jesus.

You cannot put the gospel of love in a box, take it home, and hide it under your bed. The box of narrow-mindedness and provincial thinking, the box of limited vision and opportunity and the box of the seven last words, "We never did it that way before," all kill the forward movement of the spirit's power and presence.

When we are truly open to God's leadership, the Christian way of life becomes exciting and unpredictable. As we learn to trust in God's direction for our lives, we will discover blessings and new meaning for our lives that far surpass our greatest expectations.

God chooses people whom we would never choose. When we remain bound to our traditional loyalties and identities, we limit our ability to know Christ and to follow Christ. When we stay locked in resentments and fears and old grudges, when we can't forgive and find freedom, we hinder the movement of the Spirit.

What are we to do when the Holy Spirit moves in startling and unexpected ways, challenging the boundaries we thought were fixed, making no distinction, and offending our sense of propriety? Sometimes all we can do is give thanks for the Spirit's movement and not do anything to get in its way.

When God comes to live in us, it is God's love that comes and lives in us. Love. Pure love. Absolute love. The love of Christ comes and lives in you. That is Christ's commandment to us: that we are loving people; that the love of Christ is to live in us.

And the result of all of this loving living inside of you? Why don't you try it and see?