

Roasting Sacred Cows
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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4/24/16

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³ saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

⁴ Then 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. ⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ 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.' 17 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?"

18 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."

SACRED COWS

I was talking with Pastor Hal this past week about how pastors need to go slow when they go to a new church.

Hal said his professor warned him to be especially careful about the furniture.

Until you know who gave that furniture and what it means to the congregation, don't you dare move it!

That's good advice.

Don't move the furniture.
Don't change the order of worship.
Don't change the music.
And so forth.

If you change things too quickly in the community of faith, you're in for some conflict.

Don't try and roast those sacred cows too early.
If you do, you might be the one who gets burned!

The early church was filled with sacred cows.
You see, all of the early Christians were also Jews.
So, they inherited all of the religious traditions of the Jewish faith.

Now, to be fair, these traditions did have a purpose.
The dietary laws were designed to impress upon God's people that they were different from all the other people of the world.

God had chosen them.
God had set them apart.

And they would demonstrate this by the way they lived.

God's people wouldn't be like all the other people of the world.

They would dress differently.

They would act differently.

They would even eat a different diet.

This idea is still an important concept for practicing Jews.

I watched one of those home remodeling shows recently.

It was a Jewish family from New York.

And one of the non-negotiable items in the remodeling of their home was that they must have a kosher kitchen. Two ovens, two refrigerators, and multiple preparation areas were necessary in order to meet their interpretation of the Jewish law.

I'm not being critical.

You could see how much it meant to them by their reaction after the kitchen was done.

Meal time became for them a time not only to eat but also a time to reaffirm their faith identity. Meal time was a sacred time for them.

SACRED COWS CHALLENGED

When Peter and his friends made their way to Jerusalem, they ran into conflict.

I just see the religious leaders in Jerusalem with fire in their eyes and their hands on their hips.

Peter had made the mistake of roasting a sacred cow.

He had preached the gospel to Gentiles.

The Gentiles became believers.

And then Peter even ate with them.

Instead of setting himself apart from the world, Peter had become a part of the world.

How could he call himself a good Jew if he contaminated himself in this way?

When Peter got to Jerusalem, the Jewish believers asked,
“How could you do this?
How could you break the law in such a blatant way?”

Peter began to explain it to them step by step.
He said,

“I’m like you.
All my life I’ve lived by the traditions of our faith.
I’ve never let any unclean food touch my lips.
But, then I had the most remarkable vision.

Something that looked like a sheet descended from heaven, and when the four corners of the sheet were dropped, I could see what was in the sheet.

It was not a pretty sight.
Creepy crawly snakes, smelly pigs, lizards and other assorted animals that were forbidden to us.

And a voice said, ‘Kill and eat.’
And I responded, ‘No way. It’s not allowed. It’s not kosher, and I insist on kosher.’

Two more times the sheet descended and the voice said, ‘Kill and eat.’
But, I resisted.
The thought of breaking the law in this way was repulsive to me.

But, then the voice said,
‘What God has made clean you must not call unclean.’

I didn’t know what to make of the vision. I thought for a moment it was just a bad dream.
But, right after this three Gentiles were knocking at the door.
They had come from Caesarea, and they wanted me to go with them.

The thought of going into the home of a Gentile made me sick at my stomach.
But, then I remembered the vision.

The voice said,

‘What God has made clean you must not call unclean.’

And then I understood.

The Spirit was telling me to go with these guys and to treat them like anyone else.

I shouldn’t discriminate against them just because they were Gentiles.”

THE HOLY SPIRIT ROASTS THE SACRED COWS

And now the sacred cows are roasted once and for all by the flame of the Holy Spirit.

In order to prove his point Peter said,

“These six guys with me today saw it all.

They are my witnesses.

This is what happened next.

A Gentile named Cornelius said that an angel appeared to him and told him to go to Joppa and send for me. The angel said that his whole house would be saved by the message that I would bring.

Well, I preached the gospel, and before I could even get through my sermon the Holy Spirit fell on these Gentiles just like it did on us at the beginning.

I couldn’t believe it.

And then I remembered what Jesus said.

‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

When Jesus said ‘you’ will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, I thought he just meant us Jews.

But, apparently, these Gentiles had also been accepted into God’s family. How else can you explain it?

I had no authority to judge what God was doing.

But, one thing was sure.

I didn’t want to get in God’s way!

There was a dramatic pause at this point in the story.

The Bible puts it this way, “When they heard this, they were silenced.”

Have you ever been sure that you knew what God wanted?
And then you discovered that you were wrong?

If we are to grow in faith, sometimes we have to be silenced by new insights.

Sometimes our sacred cows have to be roasted.

Sometimes the politics of purity have to give way to the politics of grace.

Many people were considered unclean in the ancient world.

The criteria for who was unclean was simple.

If you were different in any way, you were unclean.

If you were male, Jewish and without any physical deformities then you could be clean.

If you were blind, lame or disfigured you were unclean.

Foreigners or Gentiles were by definition unclean.

And apparently God's people thought the dirt rubbed off.

Go to a Gentile's home, and you are unclean.

Eat with a Gentile in his home, and you are doubly unclean

Bring a Gentile too far into the temple, and you could be executed.

We might not worry too much these days about kosher food laws, but we still worry about welcoming the wrong kind of people.

We still worry about those foreigners.

We still worry about those whose moral compass is different from ours.

But, do our worries sometimes keep us from seeking the kingdom of God?

Do our worries keep us from bringing the message of the gospel to people who need to hear it?

Could God be working in the lives of people and situations that we thought were hopeless?

When the Spirit of the Lord comes even enemies can become friends and family.

In the face of such grace and power sometimes we too are silenced.

JESUS' EXAMPLE

We should have guessed that the Spirit of the Lord would surprise us in this way.

After all Jesus broke all the rules.

He often ate with sinners and tax collectors.

He worked on the Sabbath.

He suggested that God's people should even love their enemies.

He touched the untouchables.

He healed those that were considered hopeless.

And from time to time Jesus even extended his word of grace and healing to the Gentiles.

It foreshadowed that time when the word would be preached not only in Jerusalem and Judea but also to the ends of the earth.

And yet many of those early disciples just didn't get it.

Peter and later Paul had to pound the message again and again.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ was for the whole world. Salvation would not be limited by geography or race or anything.

God in Christ was in the business of making the unclean clean.

MOVING THE FENCE

William Barclay told a story from World War II.

It seems that in France some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to cemetery to have him buried.

The priest gently asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic. The soldiers didn't know.

The priest sadly informed them that in that case, he could not permit burial in the church yard.

So the soldiers dug a grave just outside the cemetery fence.

And they laid their comrade to rest.

The next day the soldiers came back to add some flowers, only to discover that the grave was nowhere to be found.

Bewildered, they were about to leave when the priest came up to speak to them.

It seems that he could not sleep the night before. He was deeply troubled about his refusal to let them bury their fallen comrade in the parish cemetery.

So, early in the morning, he moved the fence, in order to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

Often we in the church are in the fence building business, always talking about what we believe and what we don't believe.

That's an important and necessary activity. Truth demands that we establish some boundaries.

But, I would submit to you that in light of the ministry of Jesus and the message of today's lesson, it is equally important that we learn how to be fence movers as well.

Truth does indeed demand that we establish some boundaries, but grace demands that we keep those boundaries somewhat flexible.

INVISIBLE FENCES

Sometimes the boundaries we create are not based upon God's Word. Instead, we create those boundaries so that we can feel safe and comfortable.

Have you ever seen one of those invisible fences for dogs? You train the dog with a collar that emits a mild shock whenever they get near the boundary of the property.

It's amazing how quickly some dogs learn the location of that invisible boundary.

They won't go near the edge of the property.

In this case, of course, the boundary is good.
It protects the dog from the perils of getting lost and hurt.

But, sometimes we set up invisible boundaries that are not so good.
We unconsciously set restrictions on where we can go and what God can do.

Those invisible boundaries are man made.
But, they can also be very powerful.
Sometimes, they are even debilitating.

God rehabilitates us by taking down the walls and building bridges.

You see, God's kingdom has no boundaries.
God's kingdom is for the whole world.
"For God so loved the world that he gave us his only son ..."

Following the risen Christ is never about feeling safe and comfortable.
We have to leave home and go to that place that God will show us.
It's a sacred journey that leads us to some surprising places.

Just as God had a dream for Peter, I believe that God has a dream for us as well.
It is a dream of reaching the world for Christ.

In that dream we see that even those things that frighten and disgust us can be used for the glory of God.
God can make things clean that once seemed hopelessly soiled.

Even a cross can be redemptive in God's hands.

The hymn puts it this way,
"Sin hath left a crimson stain.
He washed it white as snow."

The gospel is always expansive, reaching out in ever expanding circles.
The Spirit of the risen Christ makes repentance and new life possible for everyone.

Unfortunately, it is often our nature to hunker down with those who are just like us.

But, God sends us a vision, a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

And God sends us people who bid us to go to places that we would have never gone and preach the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

The Scripture tells us that a Gentile man by the name of Cornelius was converted because of that vision which Peter received.

But, I believe that Peter was converted as well, along with the rest of the church.

Their vision of what it meant to be a disciple of Christ was renewed and expanded.

And that vision continues to change what we think and believe.

So I ask you this morning, who do you think is unclean?
Who do you avoid because you do not like what they believe or how they act?

Maybe that's the very person God wants you to visit with a word of hope and salvation.

Don't try and resist.
Take it from a hard headed guy by the name of Peter.
The flame of the Spirit can change everything.

Sacred cows are still being roasted!
And maybe some of those cows are even yours.

Amen.