

April 24 –

Sermon: When Rules Don't Count

Scripture: Acts 11:1-18

Again, we are confronted by a story from Peter's life soon after the resurrection. It was another growing time for Peter. As we see his struggles we are challenged to grow as he grew. We also hear the generally negative response of other faithful to his doing a new thing. We are left to ask, "Would we be a witness to the new way God is breaking through into our lives or are we more concerned about the rules?"

It all begins with a dream. Peter sees a sheet coming down from heaven and is told to kill and eat. The animals contained in the sheet are all considered to be unclean. Their dietary rules said you should abstain from eating them. This happens three times with God saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean." Peter is puzzling about what this might mean, when a soldier from the home of the Centurion Cornelius arrives saying God had instructed Cornelius to send for Peter. Now Peter was in a quandary. Jews did not enter the houses of Gentiles. To do so meant that you were ritually unclean. And beyond just entering their homes, you most certainly did not eat with a Gentile or stay with them. All of the rules that had been created that kept Jews separate from the Gentiles were telling Peter to say, "No, I am not coming." We need to understand that part of the reason for those laws was the very survival of Judaism. Without remaining deliberately separate, as a persecuted minority, they would have been absorbed into the larger culture a long time before. These rules had become, in part, an essential part of their faith. To break them meant more than being unclean, it began to mean that you were not really Jewish any longer. He should have refused, yet he hears the voice of God telling him that he had sent these men and Peter should go with them without hesitation. The dream was still fresh in his mind and so Peter agrees. He does even more. Since it was late in the day Peter did the unthinkable, but hospitable thing. He invited these Gentiles into the house where he was staying. Imagine you are the home owner! You had not had the dream, but now you were to entertain Gentiles in your home, making it and all the dishes and bedding unclean! It tells us some of the force of Peter's personality because his host does just what Peter

asked. The next day Peter, along with some of his friends, and the soldier, and the slaves of Cornelius go to his house. Peter upon seeing Cornelius reminds him that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, but God had shown him that he should not call anyone unclean.

Peter continues breaking rules and I am sure it was with some trepidation that he and his fellow Jews entered the house. Peter found Cornelius had gathered his household together plus other God-fearers to hear him. As Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit came upon those present, and they began to speak in tongues, just as it had happened at Pentecost. It says that those with Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not just for Jews but for Gentiles as well. With this confirmation that he was doing the right thing, even if it meant breaking some rules, Peter baptized all there in the name of Jesus.

I am sure Peter was elated as he returned to Jerusalem. He had struggled with questions and doubt, had launched himself onto a new path, and seen the hand of God at work. Then reality sets in. There was pushback from the brothers in Jerusalem. They were fine with the message going to Gentiles but they wanted them to become Jews before they were baptized. They still saw the message of Jesus as a reform movement not an entirely new faith. With this understanding they were concerned that their Jewish faith would get watered down by this inflow of new people. And besides, these rules had been important for generations. They were part of what it meant to be the people of God. Do you throw that all away just because one Gentile has an experience of the Holy Spirit? Better to get things under control right now. Celebrate that God had decided the Gentiles were not unclean, but remind them of the rules. No more baptisms, no more visiting in their homes or eating their food. Show them what is right and bring them to your understanding. After all, you believe in Jesus and these rules work for you!

Peter reminds them of how the Spirit was at work in the situation, implying God is doing a new thing. He goes further by reminding people of the prediction of John the Baptist at the time of Jesus' baptism, where John said the time would come where you would not baptize with water but by the Spirit. So obviously God was at work blessing this action that Peter had undertaken. They were silenced as they realized that "God

had given even to Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” They were going to struggle with this issue for a long time. What rules were important and what rules got in the way of what God was doing? Even Peter, after this wonderful affirmation and shattering of the rules falls back later. He is visiting a church founded by Paul. As they get ready to eat a meal the Jews sit at one table and invite Peter to join them. They hadn’t done this before but Peter’s presence gave them the strength to assert their privileged status. Paul has to chastise Peter and remind him all are equal. If he hadn’t, there would have been a rift in that church. And Paul continues to be challenged by the traditionalists. Wherever he goes he is challenged about the rules the faithful were to follow and reminded of where he was breaking what some saw as important and necessary requirements. Few of the traditionalists could bring themselves to celebrate the work of the Spirit of God seen in so many Gentiles embracing the faith. All they could see were shattered rules.

All of this reminds me of a story I heard years ago. You may have heard it to. There was a young man walking by a church. It was a beautiful summer day. The young man wore a ragged t-shirt, shorts and was barefoot. He had never been in a church. The doors of the church were open and he heard such beautiful music as he had never heard before in his life. He thought he would go in and listen. This was a church in the deep south a few years back. The ushers dressed in cutaway coats and seated all those attending. The head usher was away from his post as the man entered. As he walked down the center aisle he noticed every seat was filled so he kept walking until he got to the very front of the church and crossed his legs and sat down on the floor just as the opening hymn was ending. Then everyone heard it, “tap, tap, tap” the head usher leaning heavily on his cane heading for the young man. He moved with deliberate slowness. He had been an usher for over fifty years. Everyone saw him headed for the man. They began to whisper and shake their heads. They knew what was coming. It was too bad but order had to be maintained. Even the pastor seeing the drama unfolding before him offered a prayer for the young man and hoped he wouldn’t make too much of a fuss. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the old usher reached the young man. He stood beside him for a moment and then slowly, ever so slowly he lowered himself to the ground beside the man and shared with him his bulletin. Mostly

there was not a dry eye in the place as they saw this incredible image of welcoming and grace. Some, however, said they would be talking to the worship committee. It seemed to them the old man was no longer right in the head and needed to be replaced.

Sometimes God breaks our rules. God challenges our prejudices, and our desires to keep things the way we want them. This is a hard message to hear. We understand on a philosophical level that God is doing a new thing but when it really happens around us, and we have to do something different, that is tough. Where are we called to embrace the new?