

Overcoming the "Ick Factor"

Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, May 2, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 11:1-18; Rev. 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

For Peter, there must have been an "ick factor" here. Reading our first lesson from the book of Acts— this story from the earliest days of the Christian Church—I think it is highly probable Peter had strong emotional and physical reactions to the situation in which he found himself. For Peter dined with non-Jewish people, dined on food they were used to eating, but food that had always been off-limits to Peter because he was a Jew. And not simply off-limits, but food that was considered unclean, the very consumption of it an abomination to a Jew. I know it sounds strange to our ears, or to those who enjoy watching the TV show *"Bizarre Foods"* on the Travel Channel, but the strict dietary laws governing daily life in Judaism were clear. The 11th chapter of Leviticus in our Old Testament prohibits consuming certain animals, sea life, and birds. Now, animals that both chew their cud and have cloven hooves (a cleft that divides the hoof) are considered clean. All others, such as pigs (which though cloven-hooved, did **not** chew their cud), were unclean. Sea life that had scales and fins were acceptable. Shellfish were not. And so on. To consume food considered unclean was to defile yourself, and thus you would not be pure and holy before God.

Even though Peter was a Jew who had become Christian and now followed Jesus Christ (who himself had said that nothing going into a person can defile them; rather, it was their own sinfulness coming out of them that defiled them), and even though Peter knew that obeying specific Jewish Laws would not bring him closer to God or earn him salvation (only his crucified, risen savior could save Peter)—the problem was that the dietary regulations set down in scripture centuries earlier were well-known to Peter, his obedience to those laws ingrained in him through years of instruction in the synagogue. So there had to have been this moment in the middle of the meal with the Gentiles when Peter gagged and thought, "I can't stomach this." How do you undo years of a deeply-held belief in what is right and what is wrong, what is faithful and what is not?

Talk about "ick." Look how long it can take you or me to eat a particular food again once we have been sickened on it, or just happened to experience a 24-hour bug at the same time? I have, over the years, avoided eating the following things because I became sick around the time I ate them: Pizza with mushrooms. Garlic bread. Egg salad (I was sick on that right before my ordination day). Ham salad (consumed in fancy little sandwiches at my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary party). In each case, it took awhile before I ate those things again. Ice cream. (I know. Sounds positively un-American. But when I was 3 and had chicken pox down my throat, I was given ice cream to eat and it came back up. I like ice cream today, but I don't crave it the way others do.) One of my children was sick the day

after we had spaghetti. She didn't eat sauce on her noodles for nearly 4 years. So don't you suppose Peter was a might uncomfortable, maybe even queasy as he supped with these Gentiles?

But the story wasn't just about food. That was only the half of it. There also was the issue of Peter's **relating to** the people associated with eating this kind of food: The non-Jews, the Gentiles. Not only would Peter have been raised in his Jewish faith to limit his contact with them, but he would have been aware of many an Old Testament warning against intermarriage and intermingling with those who didn't worship the Lord God, who possibly even worshiped false gods. How do you undo years of deeply held belief in who is in and who is out, who is acceptable and who is not? There was a definite "ick factor" for Peter regarding the Gentiles.

As Christ-like and loving as Peter wanted to be, as aware of the fact that Jesus himself had eaten with sinners and outcasts—and yes, even Gentiles—and as eager as Peter was to tell the Good News of this Jesus Christ to the nations, the truth is that, up until this point in Acts, in the life of the early Christian Church it was considered the norm to become Christian by being Jewish first. That was the usual path. Outsiders, while not overtly turned away, were simply not made to feel welcome. It wasn't their religion. The Good News wasn't for them just yet.

So strong was that understanding that Peter himself was royally chewed out (pardon the pun) by his Jewish-Christian brothers who believed he should never have placed himself in the position of sharing the Good News while sharing the food of the Gentiles. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" his brothers demanded.

Well, Peter explained in a most thorough manner that it was never his idea at all. Peter did not initiate such a thing as eating unclean food and instructing Gentiles in the path of Christian discipleship. It was God who initiated it. It was God who began to do this new thing. It even took Peter by surprise!

First, God provided a vision for Peter—although he had to provide it three times before Peter finally "got it"—and that vision was of a host of unclean animals and sea life and birds, and the Lord God commanding Peter to kill and eat those creatures. When Peter refused, God said definitively, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

At the same time, God was at work in the lives of some Gentiles from Caesarea, who experienced the Holy Spirit telling them to go find this Simon Peter in Joppa, for another of their friends had been told by that same Spirit that the message Peter would share with them would bring them salvation, would save them and their household.

And then, when Peter sat at table with them in Caesarea (as initiated by God), and as Peter began to tell them the story of Jesus Christ (as the Spirit said he would), the Holy Spirit came upon these Gentiles in that room the same way the Holy Spirit had come upon Peter and other apostles. Now, remember these Gentiles hadn't

become Jewish. They hadn't stopped eating pigs and shellfish. They hadn't yet been baptized. But God's Spirit came upon them anyway, and they believed the Good News Peter brought them. They believed that Jesus Christ was the Lord.

Peter, while no doubt still gagging on a bit of pork, nevertheless thought to himself (and then later said to his critical brothers), "If...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?" In other words, he figured why should he stand in God's way? So Peter was prepared to overcome the "ick factor," with God's help.

Our story ends with Peter's brothers in the faith praising God that God would bring this faith even to the Gentiles. Apparently God was also at work through Peter's detailed telling of the whole event (vision and all). God helped Peter's fellow Jewish Christians overcome their own "ick factor."

This was a pivotal moment in the life of the Christian Church—suddenly it was understood that no one was excluded from the possibility of receiving the Holy Spirit, coming to faith, and being gathered in the circle of God's compassion and love. Deeply held beliefs about who was in and who was out had been transformed into a new belief that God's mission field was now wide open—as wide as all creation.

And the Church hasn't been the same since. Oh, we still struggle with the long, slow discernment process of how God is calling us to be his disciples in the world. There are still places we fear to tread, still times we withhold our resources and heart, still people with whom we limit contact. I guess it's fair to say we'll continue to need God's help in overcoming any "ick factor" on our part that prevents us from sharing God's life with others. But who are we to hinder God? Who are we to stand in God's way? And more to the point, if we discern God **is** doing a new thing, drawing the circle of his redemption ever larger, how can we participate? **AMEN.**