

Sermon Series "Acts" - Peter Goes on a Walkabout  
Acts 11:1-18 / Acts 9:32-12:25  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
July 16, 2017 / Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

A while back, I mentioned in a sermon about forgiveness, a barbecue place in Hartford that hires ex-cons to give them a second chance. It's called Bear's Smokehouse and I had the chance to eat there recently. They have these things called "moinks," which come in a bite-sized portion, consisting of a meatball wrapped in a piece of bacon and topped by a little bit of mac and cheese. It is pretty much the most un-kosher thing you can eat! And it was really good. And the part of Acts I will be covering today is the reason why we all can enjoy moinks, or bacon cheeseburgers, or lobsters, or shrimp cocktails, or pulled pork.

Now as Paul prepares for his upcoming ministry, the Story of Acts turns back to Peter, where he has ventured out of Jerusalem, which in turn prepares the way for Paul, and yet it is still focused completely on Peter's development as an Apostle, and his role in guiding the nascent Church.

I selected today's reading from chapter 11, called Peter's Report to the Church in Jerusalem, because it summarizes the previous 60 verses in only 18. It seemed efficient. Then Story of Acts continues at the Church in Antioch with Barnabas, who becomes important in the coming weeks, then Peter's imprisonment and deliverance.

What this chunk of Acts is about, is how the early Church separated itself from the restrictions that Judaism placed on social activities and structures. There is Peter's vision that does away with kosher rules, Peter's vision leading him to disregard the rules against associating with Gentiles or even fellow Jews who have un-clean professions, we have the first Gentile convert followed by the Gentile Pentecost, there are the first followers who are identified as "Christians," and then the symbolic liberation from the social restrictions that would have prevented the spread of the Gospel, summarized by a strong statement of faith.

Picking up where we left off from last week, Saul has been sent off to Tarsus for his own safety, and now Peter is walking around the countryside visiting believers outside of Jerusalem. He performs miracles, making sure to remove himself from the process, always saying that it was Jesus who has done these things. This is important to remember for later.

I have a few interesting notes here: First is the reference of Peter responding to the weeping widows. A few weeks ago, we heard about how the Deacons were created because the Apostles were failing to respond to the needs of widows in Jerusalem. Now outside Jerusalem, Peter is more responsive and empathetic, praying for Tabitha, who is then resurrected.

Second is where these things are happening, in the city of Joppa. Y'all are familiar with the Story of Jonah? The prophet who did not want to do God's bidding and ended up in a whale when he tried to run away. Well, before he ended up in the whale, Jonah was in Joppa, acting like a brat, and refusing to obey God. In the next chapter, while Peter is in Joppa, he also refuses to obey God. There must be something about Joppa.

Lastly, Peter stays in the house of a tanner. Tanners handled dead animals and were stained by dyes, so they are considered to be nearly the most unclean people in society. But Peter stays with Simon the Tanner, disregarding that social stigma and restriction on association.

In the next chapter, we see the story of Cornelius, who becomes the first Gentile Convert. This story follows the same structure as the Story of Saul's Conversion, where the convert and the believer are both given visions about the other, to bring them together.

So, Cornelius is a Roman Centurion in the Italian Cohort, who is properly pious, the type of pious Gentile that God favors, so he receives a vision to send for Simon, who is called Peter at the house of Simon the Tanner in Joppa. This almost sounds like the setup for an episode on a sitcom or a bit by Abbot and Costello.

Meanwhile in Joppa, Peter also has a vision. He was meditating and praying while fasting on the roof of the tanner. He saw something described as “something like a large sheet” descending from the sky, which included all manner of edible creatures. A voice tells him to kill and eat whatever he wants. Peter refuses, responding that he has never eaten anything unclean or profane. The voice replies that “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

This happens three times, and then Peter was left alone to consider what this meant. Peter is undergoing a change, and unlike Paul's sudden change in an instant, Peter's is more of a progression that we see running through this entire chunk of Acts where he is challenged by God to set aside all the social restrictions that Peter had grown up learning and accepting and engaging in. That time is ending, and Peter, as the leader and symbol of the Church at that time, is progressing towards that goal.

While on the roof, Peter receives another vision instructing him to go with the men sent to collect him. The phrase used, “without hesitation” is a Greek idiom essentially meaning to “obey without considering the implications.” This is important because these are not fellow Jews that have come for him. Jews were not to associate with Gentiles, so Peter is being told to go with them, and not worry that they are Gentiles or the stigma associated with them.

So, he ends up before Cornelius, and he corrects a couple things about of his overzealous piety, and learns of the vision instructing Cornelius to listen to him and all that he says. Verse 34 starts with a phrase that in the Greek is an indicator that what follows is inspired prophecy, recounting the story of the Gospel, emphasizing the accessibility of Jesus to ALL peoples, not just the House of Israel, stuff that we have all heard before and are familiar with. However, this time Peter begins with a strong statement that is not so explicit in the Gospels. Peter said: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.”

While Peter was preaching this, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles while they were listening to him, in what is now called the Gentile Pentecost. Peter initiates this event as directed by God, but he also becomes the witness of it. Peter is a witness of Jesus in the flesh, of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the work of the Spirit in Samaria, and now of the Spirit in the household of Cornelius, which is full of Gentiles. Only Peter is equipped to recognize the similarities and authenticity and significance of all these events. And this completes the task that God has given to Peter, which changes the way that Peter thinks about the admission of Gentiles into the Church. They do not have to become Jewish first, they can come as they are.

Now, he has to let the rest of the Church in on this new direction. He does this in today's reading, his Report to the Jerusalem Church. In it, Peter emphasizes in his response to those criticizing his actions that he was only doing what God had instructed him to do. His powerful conclusion summarized Peter's transformation, "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?"

What happens next for the rest of this portion of Acts interweaves historical milestones and symbolic actions.

We have the creation of the Church in Antioch with great numbers, so Barnabas was sent to check it out, and he confirmed everything, then went and got Saul from Tarsus to join him in Antioch. That church grew, and we reach the milestone where the term "Christian" is first used to describe the Followers of Jesus. Soon after, there is a prophet named Agabus who predicted that a famine would strike Judea, so the Antioch Church prepared to send what they could, especially food, to Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, there was King Herod Agrippa, who was the Nephew of Herod Antipas who reigned during Jesus' ministry, and he was grandson of Herod the Great, who reigned when Jesus was born. Anyway, he ordered that the Apostle James, brother of John be seized and executed by the sword. The milestone here is that James Zebedee is not replaced as Judas was, nor will any more of the Twelve. This is first and only mention of an

Apostle being martyred in the New Testament.

This is going on during Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, that memorializes Israel's liberation from Egypt. I think that what follows is filled with symbolism based on this context, and ties up what had happened before.

Now, Peter is seized by Herod Agrippa, King of Judea, and thrown in prison. In the night, an Angel of God appears and delivers Peter out of prison, who then returns to the Jerusalem Church, who spirit him away to Caesarea, beyond Herod Agrippa's reach. Herod Agrippa is then approached by his subjects who are starving because of the famine. When he provided relief, Herod Agrippa presented himself in a vainglorious manner, adulating in the cries from the crowd calling him a demigod, not a mortal; and since he had not given glory to God, he was struck down in a horrific fashion. The chapter ends noting how Saul & Barnabas have been delivering food.

I think that there are three things symbolically going on. First, we have King Herod Agrippa who exploited the needs of his own subjects, while people from a different province, who are not even Jewish, are freely sending in relief. Then there is the comparison with Peter, who always made sure that he did not take any credit, but gave credit to Jesus. So when Herod Agrippa then blasphemes by allowing himself to be seen as a demi-god for his benevolent actions, he is struck down by being eaten by worms, which refers to a stomach-related issue. This is also confirmed by the Jewish-Roman Historian Josephus' description of his death.

Second, an angel liberates Peter, who symbolically represents the church, from a Judean prison, and then departs into Gentile lands; which invokes the imagery of Passover, where Israel is freed from the oppression of Pharaoh, and departs for the promised land.

Lastly, I think that this story is symbolic of the Church's liberation from the restraints of the Judean social stigmas and restrictions placed on all aspects of life that keep people separated. That is anathema to Jesus and the Good News. Jesus always brought people together, from all walks of life, and did not care about who was respectable or not, who was perceived as clean or not. The social restrictions needed to be broken if Jesus' mission was to be truly accomplished.

This was a theological crisis for the Early Church that these stories are addressing. The idea that God has chosen a particular people as an object of special regard cultivates the dangerous idea that God therefore did not choose others. Throughout history, those who have seen themselves as God's Elect are often inclined to think that God has not chosen those who disagree with their beliefs or customs.

When we pin labels on those whom we see as disagreeable opponents, we disenfranchise them. Especially in today's society and all its conflicts and divisions. We can disagree with one another, and it's okay, but what isn't is if we allow our disagreements and differences to cause the kind of divisions that de-humanize others.

This is what Peter learned on his walkabout. What became clear to Peter is that to maintain that which divided people was not the Good News of Jesus Christ; that God has declared clean what Peter considered profane. He realized that it is not the prerogative of anyone else to judge, for as he preached to Cornelius, "It is God alone who judges the living and the dead." And all this is probably why he started his statement of faith to Cornelius by saying, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..."

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

Loving God, by Your Holy Spirit, feed our faith on Jesus the Christ so that we grow stronger in our loving concern for other people. Strengthen our faith so that Christ may live in us, so that we may live to please You, rather than trying to please any greed or selfishness we may feel. And may Your Spirit help guide us to accept any perceived outsider as one of us. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer

[PAUSE]

Loving God, it is with awe and wonder, joy and gladness we offer You our thanks, and pray for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for each breath we take; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who have sacrificed of themselves for us.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for those around us who need your care. We pray for those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, broken-hearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. We pray for the caretakers who bring comfort to those in need. We pray for all who put themselves between us and harm in this chaotic world. We pray for the victims of terrorist attack and for their families.

Help us to see Your presence burning in the hearts of others; grant that we may all be united in a fellowship of love and prayer; give us the courage to pick up our cross and respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

The Suddath Family  
Sean Larose

Deanna Muzzulin

Sue Kenny

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

## Psalm 98

1 O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gained him victory.

2 The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

4 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

5 Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy

9 at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

## 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. 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.’

*[Sermon covered Acts 9:32-12:25]*

*[ <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=367180135> ]*