



All Things New: A New Diet

Acts 11:1-18

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The year I lived and worked with the Iona Community on the Isle of Iona in Scotland, ages ago, “hospitality” was a major theme of our lives as we ran the two centers, the Abbey and the MacLeod Center, on the island. Guests would come, usually for a week at a time, sometimes a long weekend, and a central part of the community’s mission was to offer and practice hospitality. The staff were not to sit at a staff table, but interspersed among the guests, to facilitate building community. For the first few months I was there, I was the cook at the MacLeod Centre. Unlike the Abbey, the Mac, as it is called, welcomed guests that were often from very different walks of life than most of the staff were. The Mac was a more modern facility than the restored 13th century Abbey and was designed to welcome school groups and other community groups. Sometimes these were groups of troubled teens, or women from shelters and safe houses who were domestic abuse survivors, or groups in some sort of rehabilitation program, or men who were homeless and trying to get their lives back on track. By the time I had, with my kitchen crew, gotten the noon or evening meal on the tables for anywhere from 30 to 90 people, I confess that my energy was non-existent for conversation with people I didn’t know, whose lives and experiences were vastly different from mine. Rather than sit down at a table in the dining room, I often took my meal up to a staff member’s office and ate in blessed solitude and quiet, before heading back to the kitchen to

organize and oversee clean up. Probably the most charitable view of my actions on those days was that I had done my bit to practice hospitality by simply getting the meal prepared. Others could take over at that point.

Though I sometimes bailed out, the Iona Community and staff were trying to practice and model a radical welcome. Not just sharing space, but sharing themselves, which is what true hospitality is—engaging in conversation with folks who were overlooked by society more often than not, getting to know them, letting our different worlds intersect for a while, discovering what their struggles were, their dreams, finding common ground, but also gaining perspective into what we didn’t have in common, not glossing over the vastly different circumstances of our lives and backgrounds.

Sitting at table with other people and sharing a meal is one of the most intimate, personal things we do with each other. Sharing hospitality is welcoming other people into our lives. The walls come down when we sit at table together. For the first century followers of Christ, hospitality was a huge issue. The Jewish people did not share meals with Gentiles. The dietary laws were part of their very identity, part of what kept them separate, “holy” even. And they were supposed to be set apart. God had called them to be set apart, God’s chosen people. And living in an occupied territory, under pressure to assimilate, the dietary laws were critically important. As the scholar William Willimon writes, “We must not read this story from the safe vantage point of a majority religion, ... but

rather, read the story as it was first heard—from the minority point of view, people for whom a bit of pork or a pinch of incense or a little intermarriage was a matter of life and death for the community. The dietary laws are not a matter of etiquette or peculiar culinary habits. They are a matter of survival and identity for Jews.”¹

As the gospel began to spread to Gentiles, hospitality became one of the central points the early church had to wrestle with. How was the church going to incorporate both Jews and Gentiles? Could such a thing even be possible? Do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to be full members of the early church? It is hard for us to imagine how world-changing this was for the early followers of Christ. Peter’s vision of a sheet or sail descending with all manner of creatures in it, clean and unclean, and a heavenly voice saying, “go ahead, eat!” blows his mind, to put it in today’s vernacular. “I couldn’t possibly do that!”, Peter says, “I have never eaten anything unclean!” This is about so much more than diet, yet diet is at the very core of Peter’s, and the Jewish nation’s, identity. God is about to change something fundamental. Remember, these were God’s laws in the first place, and the Jewish people were being faithful to God in following these laws. But now God is doing something new and expanding the circle of God’s people.

The story as we have it in today’s passage is Peter’s re-telling of what just happened in the previous chapter. The fact that Luke writes the story twice tells you it’s really important. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, which means he is in command of 100 soldiers, is one who fears God. There were gentiles, called God-fearers, who had come to believe in God and were often quite devout, as Cornelius is—he is one who gives alms generously and prays constantly. Cornelius has a vision of an angel who tells him to send men to Joppa to bring back a man called Simon Peter. So Cornelius does. The next day, as these men are drawing near to Joppa,

Peter goes to the roof of the home where he is staying to pray, and there he has his own vision and hears the heavenly voice telling him to do something he has never even considered doing his entire life. Peter has the vision three times, with the voice telling him, “Kill and eat. What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” As Peter is puzzling over what this means, the men sent by Cornelius arrive. The Spirit tells Peter, “I have sent these men, go with them.” Peter gives them lodging for the night, and goes with them the next day, back to Caesarea where Cornelius is.

Cornelius explains to Peter about the angel’s visit, and Peter begins to preach. His opening words are remarkable—his experience is similar to the scales falling from Paul’s eyes during his conversion. This, too, is a conversion of sorts. Peter says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” In the past, God *did* show partiality. The people of Israel were God’s chosen people. For Peter now to proclaim that God shows no partiality and accepts those from every nation who follow him is world-changing. For the first time Peter understands that the gospel is for everyone. He goes on to briefly recount the story of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection. While he’s still speaking, the Holy Spirit descends upon all who are gathered there in Cornelius’ house. It’s another Pentecost as they begin speaking in tongues and praising God. There are other Jews there with Peter, and they are all astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit is being poured out on the gentiles. But they cannot deny it. It is happening before their eyes. Peter says, “who can withhold the water of baptism for these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So, these gentiles are baptized, brought into the church, and Peter stays with them for several days.

Word gets back to Jerusalem about what has happened, and what Peter has done, and he

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), p. 96.

must go explain himself. The circumcised believers—that is, the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem—cannot believe that Peter has eaten with gentiles. Shared and accepted hospitality. Crossed boundaries, lines, and identities that should never be crossed. “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” they ask. And Peter tells them the story, step by step. He finishes by saying, “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?” And when they hear that, they are silenced. And in that silence, their world shifts, too. Then they praise God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” The struggle isn’t over. This issue will be revisited. Paul, too, will have to argue this case before the council of Jerusalem as they debate whether converted gentiles must be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses. But for now, they are rejoicing that the circle has expanded to include the gentiles.

In N.T. Wright’s book, “Acts for Everyone,” he writes, “All this ... means that there are no ethnic, geographical, cultural or moral barriers any longer in the way of anyone and everyone being offered forgiveness and new life.”² Wright stresses that this is not about mere tolerance, “Cornelius didn’t want God (or Peter) to *tolerate* him,” he says. “He wanted to be welcomed, forgiven, healed, transformed. And he was.” The dietary laws were a way to preserve the Jewish nation’s identity, to survive intact as a people. But God moves Peter and the early church to a new source of identity. Their identity now is in following Christ and welcoming others regardless of who they are. God shows no partiality, and the Holy Spirit will blow where it wills. They are now called to show hospitality to gentiles, too, to sit at table with them and share the gift of life.

We are called to show the same radical hospitality as Peter and the early Jewish followers of Christ did. In this deeply divided world, what barriers does God call us to reach beyond? Who do we keep our distance from? Who are we wary of? Who do we think is beyond God’s reach? This is not a time to draw a protective circle around ourselves--keep ourselves safely within and those who are “other” out. It is very tempting to do that, to try and keep ourselves separate, safe and secure. But now more than ever we need to sit at table with those who are different, those we may have very little in common with. If Peter could share the love of God and stay in the home, not just of a Gentile, but a Roman centurion, a military leader of the occupying forces, then there truly are no boundaries that the Holy Spirit can’t break down.

Peter was very clear that this was not his work, but the Holy Spirit’s. God was the one who brought Cornelius and Peter together. The Holy Spirit descended upon Cornelius and his household before they were even baptized. If God is reaching across such a vast divide, then, Peter says, “who am I to get in God’s way? Who am I to hinder God?” Willimon says, “Faith is often our breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’”³ That’s the question we need to ask ourselves. In the midst of shrinking church budgets, in a time when the church no longer holds the central place in society it used to, in a deeply troubled world and divided nation, God is still very much at work—and at work through us. The way forward is not to draw the circle tighter, but to live with radical hospitality and the courage to ask, “what is God doing, where on earth is God calling us?” and then, to be as open to the Spirit’s answer as Peter was.

² N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 170.

³ Willimon, p. 99.