

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 24, 2016

"THAT'S NOT KOSHER!"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 11:1-18 ~ John 13:31-35

From time to time I have regaled you with stories about our children's bizarre pets ... all those snakes and lizards and creepy hermit crabs. But just to set the record straight, we did have a more traditional menagerie as well ... perfectly acceptable dogs and cats and African pigmy hedgehogs. The smartest pet we ever had was a miniature poodle named Noodles. We lived in the country at that time with a breathtaking view of the Texas hills, but we couldn't turn poor little Noodles loose in our backyard. We didn't have to worry about the suburban perils of the street and the dreaded dogcatcher ... and while we did have occasional mountain lion sightings ... my biggest concern was the enormous number of deer that cruised through our yard every day. They certainly weren't dangerous, but Noodles loved to run and he would have chased them to the Mexican border given half a chance.

I knew we had to do something, but the last thing I wanted was some sort of traditional fence that would block our view, so we opted for an invisible fence ... one designed specifically to contain canines. The invisible fence has two components ... a wire buried along the desired boundary and a dog collar that sounds whenever the boundary is approached. If Noodles crossed the barrier he received a mildly unpleasant tingling sensation from the collar. He learned the boundary remarkably fast, and could approach it with stunning speed and then stop on a dime ... because crossing the invisible fence became repulsive to him.

Our lesson this morning from the Book of Acts is about just such revulsion. We learn that Peter was confronted by a blanket with those creepy, crawling snakes and vultures and other weird animals on it. In fact, the heavenly blanket came down three times. And each time the blanket descended, Peter said, "No, not me!"

Peter's response to God's picnic invitation was not mere squeamishness. He found the menu repulsive. None of those animals was acceptable food. His "no" welled up from deep within him. An observant Jew, Peter had spent a lifetime trying to remain ritually clean. His "no" to the heavenly invitation was the visceral, reactive, reflexive result of years of religious conditioning.

In case you haven't noticed, the UCC doesn't have any dietary laws. We like our ham sandwiches, pork ribs, and an occasional lobster, even though the Bible says that God's people aren't supposed to eat those things. You can look it up! Those laws are still on the books ... just like the prohibition against tying your horse to a fire hydrant in Montana. The Jews of Jesus' day took all of the laws of the scripture with equal seriousness ... as the revealed Divine will for their lives ... and the means to right relationship with God through obedience. Believing that God

gave the law for their own good, they obeyed as a way of honoring God ... and their strict obedience identified them as a people ... over against all other peoples. This included the dietary laws.

It was difficult for Jews who lived outside of Judea to keep kosher, there being no kosher delis in Baghdad or Athens, but their leaders urged them to preserve their special identity and to obey God all the more as they lived among the heathen. In essence, they erected invisible fences around themselves ... shaped in no small part by the dietary laws of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. In the first century it was not kosher for a Jew even to eat at the same table with Gentiles. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of eating and drinking with sinners, they weren't attacking his compassion ... they were attacking his Jewishness. They were saying, "Don't listen to him! He isn't one of us! He doesn't obey God's law!" And this is the context for one of the most significant stories in Acts ... our reading for today. It is so significant it is told twice, once when it happened and again when it is defended.

Try to imagine this picture ... Simon Peter is called before the headquarters of the Christian movement ... the church in Jerusalem ... to defend himself. They have heard that he has been eating with Gentiles. Simon Peter, mind you! The chief apostle ... the leader of the original twelve disciples ... the first to profess faith that Jesus was the Messiah ... one of the first witnesses of the resurrection ... of all people, here he was, defending his actions at headquarters. Ironically, that church was made up of Jewish believers who had already faced rejection and persecution from their own people ... their own families ... because of their beliefs were different from the more conservative elements of their religion. But the old traditions were still important to them. The Jewish scripture was still their Bible, and they obeyed God's laws revealed therein. What's more, some folks must have felt so strongly about this that they tattled on Peter, talked it around, and tried to get him in trouble. For some folks, it isn't enough that they should try to be righteous ... they need to make everybody else righteous, too, or there will be hell to pay. Their names are not recorded for us to remember, because they don't deserve to be remembered.

Called to make an account, Peter was given about ten minutes to explain a ministry with Gentiles that he had been leading for months. He told them: "One day a few months ago, I'm minding my own business, being a good Jew, up on the rooftop praying, trying to ignore the smells of the kosher soup Dorcas was cooking downstairs because it's almost lunch time and I'm famished, when I had this vision from God. A big sheet came down from heaven, like from a king-sized bed, like a sail it's so big, and in it are a pig, a vulture, a couple of snakes, some rats, a few crawfish ... every last one of them forbidden. And then a Voice told me, 'Lunch time, Peter; dig in!' What was I to do? Is this a test of my righteousness? Well, I passed that test. "No way, Lord," I say... 'That's not kosher! You know I obey your laws ... always have ... and I'm not about to start ignoring them now!' And the Voice said, '*What God has made clean, you must not call unclean*' (Acts 11:9). This happened three times, and then ... just as it disappeared ... I heard a knock at the door. Three Gentiles were standing there, sent from another Gentile, Cornelius the centurion of Caesarea, to fetch me." "*The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.*" (Acts 11:12).

It turns out that Cornelius, the Gentile, has also been praying and seeking God and giving to the poor. God honored this Gentile's prayer with a vision telling him to find Peter who will have good news for him about how he and his household can be saved.

Well, just imagine how these Jewish believers heard Peter's report. A Gentile's prayer heard by God? Outrageous! God telling Peter to break the kosher commandments of scripture? Impossible! God reversing the laws of Moses and breaking the tradition of thousands of years? That's certainly not kosher! This is dangerous ground! If the Spirit of God can tell someone to break the law, then how can the law be trusted? If God would ever lead a person to disobey scripture, what is the point of having scripture in the first place? Do we let people just do whatever the Spirit tells them at the moment? If that is the case, how can we ever speak of right and wrong ... clean and unclean ... righteous and unrighteous ... obedient and disobedient? Every person becomes a law unto him or herself. If a filthy, disgusting, crab-eating Gentile can be one of the people of God, then what good is it to be the *bona fide*, born and raised, obedient to a fault, more-righteous-than-the-rest people of God?

But that's what God did, and the church has been struggling over the relationship between law and gospel and the Spirit and the Word ever since. That's why we are not kosher, and still struggle over which biblical laws continue to apply and which do not. That's why we ping-pong between people who want to take every word of the Bible literally and make everyone follow it ... and those who want to throw away the Bible and ignore it altogether. That's why we have to interpret scripture in humility ... with the help of God's Spirit ... and the best scholarship available ... and the continuing openness to having our hearts changed ... lest we in all sincerity wind up opposing God in the name of God. That's why the church has wrestled with and redefined for each new generation ... what is right and wrong ... clean and unclean ... righteous and unrighteous ... obedient and disobedient ever since ... led by the Spirit and guided by the Word ... that's why we believe that God is still speaking!

"Look," Peter said, "I didn't want to have anything to do with those disgusting Gentiles any more than the rest of you. But who am I to argue with God?" The headquarters church listened to Peter's story, and they were silenced. *Stunned* would probably be a better description. And there follows a miracle as great as any other in the Bible ... they changed their *minds*. They changed their *hearts*. They praised God and said with no little amazement, "*Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life*" (Acts 11:18). The rest is history.

"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." This is the turning point ... the moment when the Christian faith breaks out of its Jewish box and includes anybody and everybody who will profess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is the moment when the church moves from being a Jewish sect to a new worldwide religion. This is the moment when you and I get included in the gospel of new life. How incomplete the church would have been if it had not included those whom had been labeled unclean, unworthy, untouchable by the people of God. But it took an act of God to do it ... an incontrovertible work of the Spirit in the life of Cornelius, one of God's former rejects ... and a vision to God's apostle and church to make them see that they were wrong to exclude them in the first place. This is the moment when the gospel breaks down the walls and opens the doors.

"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." Walls between "them and us" ... whether visible or invisible ... are always the prelude to hostility ... and no greater wall was ever built than the wall between Jews and Gentiles in the first century ... a wall built from both sides by centuries of conflict. It was a political wall. It was a nationalistic wall. It was a racial wall. It was an ethnic wall. It was an economic wall. It was a religious wall. It was an ethical wall. It was a scriptural wall. It was a wall of bitterness, of mutual recrimination and open hostility. It was an historical wall of terrible crimes by both sides against the other, but mostly by the Gentiles against the Jews. What can break a door through such impenetrable walls? Only the Spirit of God! Only Jesus, the Christ, whose name is remembered above all names.

Believe you me, God created a lot of chaos by breaking through that wall. But God reached through to love even the likes of you and me. And according to Jesus, the love between the people who used to be divided against one another by such walls is the distinguishing feature of those who carry his name.

So here we are ... one community, one family, brothers and sisters in Christ. Still, I don't think God is finished breaking down those walls in our world. Political, nationalistic, racial, ethnic, economic, religious, ethical, and scriptural walls still divide the human families and the human family ... walls of bitterness of all kinds.

In our so very polarized society, Jesus calls us to cross invisible fences that wall us off from those in that other political party ... that other denomination ... that other faith tradition ... that other ethnicity ... that other socio economic class ... that other race ... that other sexual preference. Closer to home, Jesus calls us to cross invisible fences that separate us from those who have hurt us and those whom we have hurt. Jesus calls us to cross all of these invisible fences, so that we may see and love others as God sees and loves them.

Christ is the door through all those walls of hostility. *"This is my body broken for you." "This is my blood, poured out for many for forgiveness of sin."* Who is this "you" to whom Jesus offers himself? Why it's you, and you, and you, whoever you are. That's why we invite all to the table. The Spirit of God does not exclude you, and neither do we, because who are we to argue with God?

May we pray?

Open our hearts, dear God, and fill them to overflowing with your love. Break doors through our walls. Teach us to forgive. Make us truly grateful not only for the grace you give us in Christ, but also for the grace you give to everyone. Amen.