

ACTS 11:1-18
PSALM 148
REVELATION 21:1-6
JOHN 13:31-35

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2022; Year C

Everybody: A Hospitality Tableau

Faceoff! It is a hockey term with which I am sure you are all familiar! Some of the backdrop for today's homiletical journey is the confrontation that took place at Antioch, the birthplace of the name "Christian," a faceoff between the apostle Peter, one of the original twelve, and the self-appointed apostle Paul. Yes, they had a smackdown come-to-Jesus-meeting, literally an argument of biblical proportions, yes, one for the ages, no doubt many of those in attendance at this sacred gathering passionately choosing sides when **only one side was right**. For some strange reason we assume that everybody got along in the first century Church, that the early Church was a veritable bowl of cherries, that everything was coming up roses that everyone was on the same ecclesiological, theological page. This somewhat surprising and open conflict took place between two faithful combatants who became adversaries, both Paul and Peter proven to be zealous followers of Jesus but now thrust in opposing roles, the polarities of their positions not availed to any intervention or mediation, neither of them willing to give an inch. Quite frankly, these were two headstrong types who just did not get along. **For all intents and purposes, it is textually apparent that Peter and Paul obviously did not like each other. Quite simply put, they were oil and water! Both combatants leaned heavily into their arrogant superiority, their reputations clearly on the line.** These two strong willed men always seemed to be too full of their own hubris, drinking their own Kool Aid, too full of their own egos, too smart for their own good. We read in Galatians Paul's persuasive perspective on the matter as he directly confronted Peter at this summit at Antioch. Let's be clear, Paul was

completely and totally in the right on this crucial issue as he stood toe to toe with the Rock, getting right in his face. Yes, that is the way that Paul describes their verbal sparring in Galatians 2:11 and following. **In this corner, weighing in with all the heavy weighted burden of the Law, was Simon Peter, Cephas, the Rock, maintaining his orthodox purity, his hardwired identity, as a tried and true Jew; and in this corner, weighing in with justification by faith alone, the law no longer necessary, but now an impediment to his faithful prowess, an anvil or millstone he considered once being hung around his neck, is Paul, formerly a Pharisee known as Saul.** Let's get ready to rumble! This recent convert as a 'follower of the way' no longer embracing the Pharisaic Judaism that once totally defined him. This fight is for all the marbles! This conflagration now being witnessed by a host of the major players forming the newfound faith, determining the future of the fragile, fledgling, about to be named "Christian" movement, about to be formerly known as the "way," as in "followers of the way!" **This bout would not even last one round with Paul delivering a solid left hook with no need of an upper cut. Peter hit the canvas just like Paul once had during his dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus.** Paul was surely wondering just what road Peter was wandering as he wandered away from the cornerstones of Jesus' transparently welcoming and inclusively hospitable gospel! **So just what triggered this visceral reaction by Paul toward someone who by all rights should have been a brother and colleague? Inquiring minds want to know! The answer is not blowing in the wind but will come a little later!**

Since we are about to talk about a couple of dreams, two distinct but very similar visions by two very different individuals, two people who save for the gospel and the grace of God would have never had cause to meet, I want you to imagine the kind of dream sequence we might see in a movie, or think of the old "who shot J. R." mystery on Dallas that spellbound its audience back in the 80s. We are going to go back in

time to some beginnings or a beginning. It would be a stretch to call it “the” beginning because we assume many events and details were never recorded by the writers who were composing their narratives that would soon become Bible. **As Luke writes in the Book of Acts he tells two stories about two people in two cities, Peter lodging in Joppa at this time, residing at one of his missional outposts at the home of Simon the tanner, and the centurion Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, forty miles distance between the two enclaves. On a certain day at about three o’clock in the afternoon Cornelius perceived a vision that appeared as plain as day, carefully instructing him to send for a man in Joppa, confirming that his prayers had been heard. The very next day at about noon, Peter went up on the rooftop to pray and suddenly he beheld a vision as well. In this trance-like-state a sheet came down with every unimaginably disgusting creature, creeping and crawling all over it, all of which had long been prohibited, deemed unclean according to Jewish Kosher law. There were four-footed beasts, surely including some big, fat, porkers, birds of the air, reptiles of every sort, or as we like to call it in Florida “reptilia!” No doubt there was a school of catfish as well as some shellfish thrown into the mix for good measure. A voice boomed in Peter’s ears, demanding him to kill and eat, every carnivore’s dream, but this dream was more like a vivid, technicolor, nightmare, no doubt a demonic trick, a temptation too much like the one about bread once thrust upon Jesus by the devil in that freaky wilderness show, all a sure and certain allusion because of the intersection of Peter’s dreaming and ravenous hunger. Despite being famished and told to feast, not fast, Peter steadfastly refused to yield to said temptation, desperately trying to maintain his ritual and realistic purity. No way he would yield and consume such filth. Whenever I read this story, I am reminded of foods that repulse me and I think that is a good way for any of us to find a way to remotely begin to even remotely begin to relate to Peter’s horrific plight. Yes, mayonnaise and every other gross condiment is at the top my personal list of forbidden fruits. The**

voice reverberated a sobering echo, declaring once again, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane!” In this instance I love the vocabulary articulated in the King James Version of the Bible, “What God has called clean, you shall not call common!” “Common!” The very word just has a certain ring to it! Of course, the vision and the voice happened three times, always a not-so-subtle reminder to Peter of his trifold denial, a constant companion that now haunted him each and every day of his life. The sheet then vanished from his eyes, taken up into heaven. What to do? What to do? What do these things mean?

As if on cue in a fabulously choreographed movie setting, the men sent from Cornelius arrived where Peter was staying, the horrific images just witnessed in this graphic dream sequence still fresh in Peter’s mind, no doubt shaking his orthodox Jewish foundations to their core. Sidebar: Long after Jesus’ death Peter remained adamantly Jewish, maintaining his Judaic identity, and even continued to refer to himself as a Jew in the biblical narrative. The Spirit informs Peter that there are three men looking for him, there is that magic number again, and, of course, the apostle had no place to go, no place to hide. There was no escape! Surprisingly, even shockingly perhaps, knowing their cultural identity as Gentile, an indication of racial, cultural, and societal pollution, Peter still found a way to extend to them the appropriate Near Eastern hospitality, inviting them into the house and giving them the mandated hospitable treatment. When word eventually and inevitably came to the rest of the disciples, describing these awful things that had transpired, oh how appalled and disgusted were Peter’s colleagues, not amused in the least! Gentiles in a Jewish home! Disgusting! Never! Never! Never! Believing their story to have merit based on his vision, the next day Peter went with them as they made the forty-mile journey from Joppa to Caesarea. Upon arrival, a large gathering had assembled for what would become a historic, bellwether, meeting in the ongoing formation and evolution

of the early Church. After coaxing Cornelius up off his knees Peter begins his testimony to them with a theological tap-dance, a two-step full of qualifiers and disclaimers all in the interest of full disclosure, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. (Common) So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?” In other words, I do not wish to be here. I would rather be any place else on earth than here. Were it not for the absolute stupidity of God and this most foolish thing I am hearing and that is now haunting me, I would not be here! But here I am! I can almost sense Luther’s infamous, “Here I stand, I can do no other!”

Not only was Cornelius and his household all gentile, but he was a Roman centurion. Now the Bible tells us very little about centurions. We are forced to go to non-biblical sources to learn anything about them. Most of the ones we learn about in the Bible are Herodian, though still very much gentile in orientation, but Luke the historian makes sure we are made aware that this is a Roman centurion. Yes, he could very well have been at Jesus’ crucifixion, in charge of crowd control, even witnessing the nails being delivered, driven, into Jesus hands and feet, an unusual nuance in crucifixion protocols. By and large, centurions, though soldiers, were not always soldiers in the way we are somehow led to assume, but rather functioned somewhat like our present police force. As Niko Huttunen of the University of Helsinki notes in a paper titled, *The Centurion’s Faith in the Gospels and Soldiers in Early Christian Imagination*, “First of all, we have to notice that the army had a broader task than it has today. According to Benjamin Isaac, a full-scale military campaign was an exception: ‘[M]any soldiers would have spent only a small part of their quarter of a century’s service taking part in campaigns; there must have been quite a few who rarely, if ever, saw active service, as several writers noted about the troops in Syria and the East.’” This does not mean that soldiers spent their time

peacefully. The troops had a role in maintaining Roman control, overpowering local unrest, co-operating in judicial processes, exacting punishments and safeguarding tax collection or extracting taxes. In a word, the army fulfilled the tasks that in contemporary societies belong to the police or to other officials. Police work or any other paramilitary or nonmilitary tasks of the army, however, do not change the fact that soldiers were first and foremost: soldiers. They were regularly exercising for warfare, but their daily drill is not described in earlier Christian sources. There are references to a military campaign in the Jewish War (e.g., Luke 19:43-44), but the New Testament primarily describes soldiers performing police work: they arrest, flog and execute Jesus, they guard the tomb, they stand in Antonia ready to imprison Paul and bring him to Rome.” Just a little background!

Well, of course, Cornelius relays his unimaginable but very believable story to the skeptical, if not cynical, accidental apostolic primate in waiting. Before Peter’s slowly opening eyes, Cornelius recalls and recounts his story, describing in great detail a man in dazzling clothes standing before him telling him his prayers had been heard and answered and that he was to straightway send for Peter who, again, was staying in Joppa as a guest in the home of Simon who lived by the sea! He adds, “. . . and you have been kind enough to come!” That, my friends, is a bit of a stretch! “So, all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say!” Peter then tells the story of Jesus, but begins with what is perhaps, and I perceive, to be the greatest acknowledgment, the most profound revelation, in all the Bible, “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.” And the rest, as they say, is history! Uh, not quite. The rest of the story presents a not so pretty picture! Fast forward to just a short time later in the Book of Acts and we find the very first ecclesial, perhaps ecumenical, council of the early Church, meeting at Antioch, a city named for Antiochus the Great. As we

awaken from our dream sequence, **we find Paul and Peter engaged in what evidently was a much long overdue shouting match in order to settle scores and address issues. To finally clear the air, their yelling and screaming at each other anything but a civil dialogue. The course of their not so pleasant debate and discourse would determine the future of the fledgling faith, specifically declaring the most critical decision the Church would ever make regarding who would we welcomed and who would not, those who would be banned, forever forbidden entry, snubbed, excluded from full, or perhaps even partial, participation, maybe even created a new version of the Temple Court of the Gentiles, a very familiar place and practice among traditional Jews!**

It is ironic in many ways that it turned out to be the apostle Peter who was uncomfortable with this level of assimilation, and thus stood in opposition to full inclusion. Peter stood convicted and found himself on the wrong side of the equation, forever in writing on the wrong side of history. Now it is impossible to fully trust chronology, any timeline that appears anywhere in the biblical narrative. We simply cannot do that. But if Luke's progression of events is even close to accurate, Peter's exclusivist theological presumptions occur after his supposedly enlightening revelation framed from what would have been his prior conversation and conversion with Cornelius. In all honesty we believed we had a breakthrough with Peter, that he had experienced an authentic, a genuine, life-changing conversion event in what he learned about the nature of gospel, i.e., radical hospitality. We thought he had come full circle, fully realizing that God's love is universal and not selective, that none are chosen above and apart, distinct from others, accepting and affirming that all are equal at the foot of the cross and equal in the eyes of God, every human person created in the gloriously divine image of the Holy. We presumed that he now understood without hesitation or reservation, without clarifications and qualifications, no exceptions, no stipulations, no ifs, ands, or buts, that

God had always embraced everyone and desired that the Israelites be the harbingers, the extenders, of grace, unlocking the keys to every proprietary door, gate openers not gate keepers. The children of Israel were to bring the “extravagant welcome” of God to all persons, regardless, “no matter who they were or where they were on life’s journey. Yes, they were blessed with the greatest, the grandest, of opportunities to be expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and vulnerably open to every human being from every tribe and clan. Yes, somehow and in some way, they frequently missed the memo and missed the point. **Peter had fallen into that wrongly followed tradition of keeping it pure, all in the family, fueled by its nationalistic pride, a trap that had nowhere good to go . . . ever! God is not a respecter of persons unless God is a respecter of all persons. Indeed, God shows no partiality! There is no divinely inspired, much less ordered, preordained, or predestined, preferential treatment! How did Peter miss what Paul had come to understand so completely and so quickly? After all, unlike Peter, Paul had never known Jesus! He never knew him! They never met!**

A little more background is in order. You see, Peter had accepted several dinner invitations and had immediately managed to embarrass and no doubt anger his host at these Agape meals, along with the other invited guests, and, perhaps most of all, himself, by refusing to be seated at table with gentile proselytes who had also been welcomed to share in the meal. These were those, yes others, who had converted to the way as followers of Jesus, mostly because of Paul’s evangelistic missionary efforts. My, what an awkward moment repeated time and time again, all in a vain attempt to appease the other eleven, to keep the peace, to preserve his loyal allegiance to his brothers, all in an effort to sustain a false sense of unity. And all Peter’s misgivings and misfortunes seemed to be galvanized in relation to this one huge, ginormous, egregious trespass, this serious violation of gospel protocol. Once word of this breach of protocol reached Paul’s

not-at-all-receptive ears, raising this most important issue, the self-appointed apostle was not at all enamored, not empathetic or sympathetic in the least, but rather was full of understandable indignity and appropriate self-righteous anger, not the slightest bit amused or pleased with the “Rock!” Time for that come-to-Jesus meeting, a long overdue summit unlike any the young Church had witnessed to date in its rapidly emerging and evolving theology, not all of it good by the way, all exacerbating some serious exponential growing pains. You see, the irony in this combustible encounter was about which shoe fit which foot. Peter had the privilege of living with Jesus for three adventuresome years. he had walked with him, and talked with him, no doubt the two of them and the thirteen of them engaging in many an intimate late-night conversation of intimate and eternal merit. Peter had witnessed countless sermons and teachable moments. He had seen up close and personal a variety of healings, human beings of all stripes being restored to their full humanity. He had seen Jesus go out of his way to heal a different centurion’s ill son. Peter was there when Jesus got his comeuppance as he was sarcastically rebuked by a gentile woman of either Canaanite or Syrophoenician decent who simply wanted a piece of the pie, what everyone else was getting, to have her sick daughter healed. In impromptu fashion she served as Jesus’ rabbi, not allowing Jesus to get away with calling her a dog or thinking of her in that demeaning, derogatory way. She stood her ground and Peter saw it all! Peter saw the way Jesus willingly, gladly and joyfully, engaged those with disabilities and mental challenges. He saw the way Jesus without judgment or prejudice embraced Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector who licked the boots of Roman occupiers in making a very good living for himself at his neighbors’ expense. Peter heard the parable of the Good Samaritan and knew by heart the ancient Shema now repackaged, a time-honored message now delivered in contemporary, even progressive form, that the lover of God and neighbor can be anyone and not a select or chosen few. In other words, Peter knew better or should have known better!

The ultimate irony of Paul condemningly rebuking Peter, declaring in front of a live audience that Peter was wrong, a hypocrite in sheep's clothing. Yes, that is assuming we do choose to buy into Luke's chronology that the Rock had just recently been in Cornelius' home and had witnessed what he witnessed. Houston, we have a serious problem! Me thinks Paul's not-so-subtle word to Peter was an icy cold "you may have lived with Jesus, but you do not know Jesus! You seem to know little if anything about Jesus! You clearly, obviously, do not know the Jesus I know!" You see, the problem was not just Peter's immediate, real time, act of disrespect, his blatant refusal to have open fellowship with Gentiles, all that transpired in those awkward moments seemingly frozen in time. No, it was the fact that apparently, by all accounts, he had already been converted on an issue that should have been settled in his mind and in his behavior toward these regarded as others. The story of Cornelius and his household was proof positive in the pudding, verifying that fact. No, Peter knew in his gut what his fellow colleagues in ministry would think. He knew that his fellow disciples would be offended and appalled and would rebuke him for daring to enter Cornelius' unclean domicile, and even inviting this entourage into a Jewish home. Once more, it is a clear reminder of the ever-present danger that attempting to keep peace or trying to maintain a false sense of unity, appeasement at all costs, has never served the Church well. As John Shelby Spong once brilliantly observed, "The Church will die of boredom, long before it dies of controversy!" Some things are worthy of conflict and confrontation, yes, hills on which to die! Peter was trying to go with the flow, follow the pervading winds of his crowd and not the Spirit, bowing to peer pressure from his fellow eleven who were also continuing their vain attempt to reinforce stereotypes while stubbornly holding fast to their bad theology. Yes, they sought to maintain a wall, barriers and borders of separation, make that segregation, strengthening an archaic class system ripe with all its traditionally defining ritualistic status symbols. And the irony is

that they did this while attempting to share the lovingly inclusive, hospitably welcoming, gospel of Jesus! Can't be done! Can't be both! Can't have it both ways! It can never be a matter of convenience, only applicable when suitable! Appeasement never works! Negotiating with the terrorism of anything lacking in ethical integrity will never fly, will never sustain. **Jesus came to abolish every ancient and archaic vestige smacking of the repulsively exclusivist rhetoric wrongfully, egregiously, delineating any constitution of us and them! Never again would there be the Hebrew Bible equivalent of aliens, foreigners, strangers in any context, a new religious, spiritual, cultural milieu being birthed in real time, some would rightfully argue renewed or restored, and all of it occurring as a new reformation taking place in those very sacred moments. Yes, it constituted a resurrection awakening for everyone involved, no doubt, or at least hopefully, Peter included! Up to now Peter was failing to practice what he had just preached, not willing to preach what he had just practiced! Hypocrite! Yes, this was a living object lesson, a pathetic first century version of the pitiful failed and flawed policy now infamously known as "Don't ask; don't tell!" Peter had been caught in his own trap! Yes, as Shakespeare once poetically said, "Hoist by his own petard!" Our works will always find us out, every time, all the time! Our prejudices will never remain lurking in the private shadows of our being, but will be transparently and painfully manifest, obvious in our naked behaviors, the not so hidden recesses of our consciences, our deep, dark, dirty little secrets! As Jonathan once confronted and indicted King David to his face, condemning him about his tryst with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah, Paul gave his own twist of "Thou art the man!" Peter stood condemned and he and everybody else in that Antioch summit knew it!**

In my practical theological studies in biblical hospitality, both in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures, today's Witness from Acts in the story of Cornelius' and Peter's conversion is a story that I

consider one of the many quintessential hospitality texts that appear throughout the biblical narrative. I would also include the further background provided from Paul's perspective on reality as found in his letter to the Galatians, an epistle which gives the play-by-play of his confrontation with Peter. Each one of these texts in their own unique way is designed to present a portrait of a God of all people who loves and embraces, who accepts and affirms, celebrating every human being and in turn expecting the same from every human being. These stories offer the ultimate egalitarian approach to life and living. Nothing less will do! Nothing less is acceptable! God's love, exhibited through gracious peace and mercy, is extended to every divine human image ever created and stamped in and on any individual, no matter. The time proven adage is true, cliché as it is, "God does not make junk! God has blessed us, each and every one of us, and made us just as we are as the song sings. Somehow Peter failed to get the memo, to fully if even partially or remotely understand that basic, not so complicated concept. Sadly and unfortunately, people of all stripes, including Christian people, have been failing throughout history to get this basic universal gospel tenet found in all reputable faiths, and specifically in our own Christian faith. Indeed, our sordid history throughout Christendom of being mistrusting of one in relation to another has proven this axiom to be painfully true. Of all the functions of mission and ministry that go into every local missional church, the number one priority, the deepest and greatest learning curve, is found in our ability and willingness to openly accept and affirm without bias all brothers and sisters who reside on this earth, all who live in this ever-shrinking global village. Paul would eventually, perhaps inevitably, and not so surprisingly, say it best in his letter to the Galatians when he declared in writing, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29). I think this last

line of ultimate import indicating admission, welcoming all persons into the household of Abrahamic faith as fellow children of Israel, unfortunately gets short shrift because of what precedes it! And you can bet your bottom dollar that Paul, had he a crystal ball and could see into a complex future for humanity, would have included every other human distinction that has caused separation anxieties and communal stress down through the centuries and continues even to now, to this very day, to diminish our divine humanity! For proof, a horrific example, look no further than the bigoted racist motivated events from yesterday's mass shooting in Buffalo, New York by a hater loaded with weapons of mass destruction. Yes, these Pauline sentiments settle the case once and for all and for all time! Case closed! Game! Set! Match! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and whose very nature is "extravagantly welcoming," expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable and expects as much, the same from us as we seek to faithfully emulate Christ, following in Jesus' precious footsteps! Amen and amen!

