

This morning we will be reading from Acts 11. Before we read this text, we need to understand that there are some things which are very clear according to the Scriptures. There are some rules laid out in Scripture which God's people are told that they cannot break.

For instance, in the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, the words of God make it very clear what God's people are able to eat. Leviticus was written as a list of rules to govern God's people as they figured out how to structure their society. For a society to form itself, it needs rules. I think we all agree on that. And so as God's people moved into a new land, the words from Leviticus outline the rules that they were to live by and govern themselves by.

It is very clear in Leviticus that God's people were to be pure. Foreigners were seen as a threat to their existence and religion. If the Jewish people were going to establish themselves and their community and proper worship of God, they needed to marry within their Jewish race and they needed to eat kosher foods.

Concerning food, it was very clear in Leviticus what God's people could eat. Let us read **Leviticus 11:9-19**

Reptiles, birds of prey. Off limits. Scripture is very clear on this. There is no wiggle room here. Scripture is very clear. Do not eat reptiles. Do not eat birds of prey. The rules were very clear. Why then did God's Holy Spirit have to then mess up all of this clarity about what are clear rules found in the Bible?

In chapter 10 of Acts, the apostle Simon Peter has a dream. It is a very disturbing dream. It is a dream which leads him to go against the clear teachings of the Bible. It is a dream which leads him to reach out to people who were not of the Jewish race and teach them about Jesus. Reaching out to people who were not pure members of the Jewish race was a clear violation of the Bible as recorded in what we read from Leviticus.

In the scripture which we are about to read, Peter will be retelling this dream. He will be retelling this dream because Peter's recent action of reaching out to non-Jewish people and teaching them about Jesus has caused the organized church leaders to become very concerned. The organized religious church leaders are very concerned because they have heard that Peter is breaking the rules which were clearly laid out in Scripture.

Read **Acts 11:1-18**

Peter was in Joppa praying. We heard last week why Peter was in Joppa. He came to Joppa because he had heard that a woman named Tabitha or Dorcas was sick and had died. He knelt down beside her, prayed over her, and she was restored to health.

Last week we also heard in the Scripture that Peter decided to stay with Simon the Tanner. That was not allowed by the Jewish rules. Being a tanner was considered unclean by the Jewish people. So Peter had already started to push the limits of what he had been taught by staying at the home of Simon the Tanner. A home, by the way, that I got to see when I was in Joppa five years ago in my trip to Israel.

So while in Joppa, Peter has this dream that challenges his fundamental belief about what he is allowed to do as a Jewish Christian. Eating unclean food may seem like a minor thing to us but to a Jewish person it was blasphemy. Their laws about what they could eat and who they could marry were essential about their identify.

If the rules about food could be challenged then what other clear rules about what was right and wrong could be challenged? If the rules about food were thrown out, then their whole belief system could be challenged. If the religious leaders accepted that Peter's dream came from God's Holy Spirit, then that would mean that every rule they lived by and defended could be challenged.

Peter was not just anyone. Peter was a central leader in the church. His name means “rock” because the church would be built upon him, Jesus once said. But it is Peter who has the dream. Peter is very clear when he tells the religious leaders that he did not initiate this dream.

He says this dream did not come from him. It came from God. According to Peter, God was challenging him to question the rules that he had been taught.

Imagine if the religious leaders had told Peter he was off his rocker? Imagine if the religious leaders had told Peter that the good news of God was reserved for only the Jewish people? Imagine if these religious leaders rejected Peter’s story as an authentic expression of God’s Holy Spirit. Imagine if these religious leaders had said, “God’s rules in Scripture are very clear and they cannot be questioned.”

If those religious leaders had told Peter that his dream was wrong, if those religious leaders had told Peter that they could not change what Scripture clearly taught, if these religious leaders had said that, then you and me would not be sitting here today.

Because to my knowledge every one of us is considered a Gentile. To my knowledge, none of us would have been able to be taught the good news of God’s saving grace of Jesus Christ. Because according to the early teachings of Scripture, we would have been forbidden from being invited into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. But because some early church leaders made the bold decision to bless this dream to Peter, you and I are part of the Christian church today.

Though there are times when being a part of a Christian community is difficult, I for one am thankful for those early church leaders who boldly believed that God’s good news is reserved for everyone.

I, for one, am thankful that those early church leaders did not allow the rules from Leviticus to keep them from welcoming the inclusive invitation that came to Peter from the Holy Spirit in a dream. I am glad someone taught me, a Gentile, about who Jesus was and is.

Of course, we may reject Peter's dream today. We may say that Peter's dream did not really happen. We may say that the rules of Leviticus of who can be welcomed into God's kingdom are more valid than Peter's dream. We can follow those rules and be consumed by who we think is clean and worthy of acceptance in God's kingdom. We can follow these rules and decide who is unclean and deserves rejection from God's kingdom because they are unclean and profane.

Rules are important. Games are no fun without rules. Society is chaotic without rules. Families are dysfunctional without clear rules. I think we all agree to that. But whenever we are setting the rules about what is clean and what is unclean, about who should be welcomed and who should be rejected from the kingdom of God, I hope we do not ignore Acts 10 and 11.

This story that Peter shares about this dream of his may cause us to rethink some rules. We may think that if we start getting lax on some rules about what is clean and unclean, who is pure and who is profane, that it starts us down a slippery slope. We may fear that our entire belief system might be challenged.

Yea, that might happen. If you accept Peter's dream as valid, it might just cause you to question everything you believe about God and the rules that we live by in our society and about what God calls pure and what God calls unclean.

Yep. If you accept Peter's dream as valid, that just might happen. AMEN.

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-Given: April 28, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Prayer of Confession (should not need)

You commanded, Holy God, and chaos yielded to your Word. All that is beautiful and good is created by your grace. But we confess to you, Creator God, that we have spent our time denying your dreams for us, living each moment for ourselves. You fixed the boundaries for your Garden, where we could have life and joy with you, but we chose to play on the garbage dumps of sin.

You told the prophets to go and bring your vision of healing and restoration, but we thought them to be fools, standing on the edges of our lives. When we had decided to have nothing to do with you,

you chose to become one of us, living, calling, creating once again through Jesus the Christ. It is through his name that we offer our confessions of sin.

Prayers of the People

For your creation, o Lord, we pause in prayer. We pray to have the strength to be good stewards of the land, water, and air. Lead us to make good decisions that sustain the goodness of your work. Let us pray to the Lord.

For the peoples in nations around the world. For people who live in places which we call our enemies. For people who live in places like Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and elsewhere. Remind us that we are all children that you created. Let us pray to the Lord.

For people in our own country. For reconciliation between people who demonize one another. For people within groups that have been stereotyped by others. For people who have been told that they are less than others and have suffered the pain of prejudice. Let us pray to the Lord.

For people in our own community who battle homelessness, those searching for gainful employment, for those who are in abusive relationships, for children who suffer at the hands of their parents and caregivers. Let us pray to the Lord.

For people in our church community who volunteer to serve others. For those who volunteer to teach, work in nursery, lead worship, help repair homes, help repair computers or make outfits to send overseas. Let us pray to the Lord.