Topic: Unclean (Season of Easter 4, Lectionary C)
Scripture: Psalm 148, Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35
Hymns: BB247 Spirit of the Living God, BB286 Blest Be the Tie that Binds, VU678 For the Healing of Nations

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Let’s take a moment to pray…

Lord, before this world's days even began, your Word was in the beginning, and it was with you and it was you. The mystery of that brings us to our knees. Yet today you allow us to open your Word and know you better. So, we ask that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Give us hearts open to your Spirit as we seek you. AMEN.

(SLIDE) Our reading from Acts 11 is actually a retelling of Acts 10:9-16. Peter receives this vision in Acts 10 about a sheet unfurling from heaven during a moment where Peter was hungry, and praying - and then he fell into a trance.

The sheet contained all manner of animal, including reptiles and birds. A voice told him to (EM BOLD) get up, kill, and eat. And in true Peter fashion he replies, (EM GASP scot) "I could never!" And in true God-fashion, this little back and forth of "Kill and Eat" happens twice more.

And this little passage is cherished amongst us Christians as the justification for all food-related things under the sun to be consumed. On the second demand to eat, Peter is told by the voice "**Do not call anything impure that God has made clean**".

And so this is one of those moments where we Christians like to get REAL literal with Scripture and suspend our metaphorical thinking and we say "Oh! So God says we can eat anything now. Sweet!" and we run to the nearest restaurant and order up a bacon cheeseburger.

When people want to discuss the differences between Jew and Christian, Acts 10 stands as one of the key points.

(SLIDE of) "We Christians can eat pork! (SMILE BIG and whisper) Acts 10". And I'll be the first to raise my hand and say, "More bacon please!" I'm also the first to say a literal reading of Scripture isn't totally a bad thing either... but I temper that with diving into context and the metaphorical reading of Scripture.

So here's some context... Acts 11 is an extension of Acts 10, and Acts 10 is an extension from Acts 9. In our reading from Acts 11 this morning Peter is actually RE-telling this dream he had and it has far more going on than just "We Christians get to eat bacon".

Let's deal with the pig (SLIDE) in the room first! Abstaining from eating certain animals comes to us from Leviticus 11. It is literally a whole chapter dedicated to animals you can and cannot eat.

God names four specific land animals, because they walk the line in terms of God's rule on what Israel COULD eat, four specific animals He names that could not be eaten. They were the Camel, the Hyrax, the Rabbit, and the Pig. God says it will make you "unclean".

As a good Jew, Peter would know all about this. It's why he defends himself by saying "**Nothing impure has ever entered my mouth!**" Leviticus 11 is given to Moses and Aaron directly by God for the Children of Israel to help make them distinct, and set apart from the world.

It is a sign of God's presence in their lives, it makes them ceremonially distinct. So keeping these kinds of strict deitary laws, from a Priestly perspective, kept Israel separate from the rest of the nations.

So, to say that Peter's vision from Acts 10 and 11 here justifies us Christians eating pork, that God has somehow undermined or just rewrote His own laws from Leviticus is not true. Christians are not Israelites. Let's go deeper...

The Book of Acts is the telling of the story, the actions, of the Disciples after Christ ascended - it is the beginning of the early Church. The Disciples have become Apostles now, and are venturing out from their time with Christ to proclaim the good news and build the Kingdom.

In Acts 9, Peter is sent to the Gentiles to preach the Good News. (EM) Oooh those Gentiles. We know them well... the word "gentile" was a kind way of saying "Person who didn't follow God", or better yet as the Pharisees might say, "Sinner".

Gentiles did all kinds of things a decent Jew would find abhorrent. They'd work on the Sabbath, they'd touch dead things, they might be lewd or commit sexually immoral acts, they'd eat pork and shellfish - they'd even cook meat in its mother's milk.

And here's Peter, a good Jewish man who has NEVER put anything unclean in his mouth, and he's sent to the Gentiles. Peter preaches the Good News, and performs some miracles, and many began to believe and so towards the end of Acts 9 Peter takes up with a tanner by the name of Simon, a gentile of course - and this is significant.

Law abiding Jews really didn't like that particular profession because tanners were constantly in contact with dead animals... and according to Leviticus this made them ceremonially "unclean". (PAUSE) Oh, I see it's starting to click, you know where I'm going with this...

Peter, a good Jew but also Apostle of Christ, takes up with Simon, a tanner, who is considered unclean - a Gentile of Gentiles. I bet it's swimming around in his mind about this little controversy - Peter would have been the talk of the town (EM: did you see who Peter has been staying with? Oh yes, Mmhm, Simon the Tanner, has his hands on dead animals all day. Oh my!).

Then Acts 10 opens with a Roman Centurion Cornelius - again, another undesirable under Jewish perception. And Cornelius receives a vision and is to send word to Peter.

This is when Peter gets his vision of the sheet coming down from heaven... and while Peter is sitting there defending his purity, "Oh, not me Lord... NEVER would I let anything unclean come near these lips" God is rebuking Him, "**Do not call anything impure that God has made clean**".

This isn't about food, folks. Food was just the example! You know when we say "It's like comparing apples to oranges" but we aren't really talking about apples or oranges? We use metaphor when we want to make an example. So, too, does God.

This isn't about food at all... it's about the Gentiles. It's about faith. It's about creation. It's about redemption. Peter's mission is to preach the Good News to the Gentiles... which was a "politically correct" term for people outside is the Jewish faith.

They were typically sinners... each of them had something that excluded them from the faith. They were unclean, they touched dead animals, they were prostitutes, they were tax collectors, they were Samaritans... or worse, Romans.

And it was Peter who was sent to teach them about the Kingdom of God, it was Peter who was sent to bring these people into the fold, it was Peter who was to preach to the undesirables, the unclean, the neglected and rejected.

Acts 11 that we read is the revelation of this lesson... Peter recalls his vision and then tells us exactly that he will he summoned by a Centurion to bring God's word to a whole household and redeem them.

Peter says (SLIDE), "**Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'. So if God gave them the same gift He gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?**"

That's the crux of this! (RPT last) And their response to this is (SLIDE) "**So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life**". (PAUSE EM wow). Now, I hear you say... "Amadeus. That sheet had ALL MANNER of animals, animals that Peter could have eaten and ones he couldn't have. Why not just pick an animal he could eat?"

I'm glad you asked, because it's the whole point of the vision and our understanding of it. As a good Jew, Peter would have not gone near ANYTHING that could even be considered unclean. Notice Peter's objection when the voice tells him to eat, "**Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth**".

Nothing. Peter is claiming he is above reproach here, he has ensured that there is no doubt, not even by accident, has Peter put to his lips anything IMPURE AND UNCLEAN, both. For a pig, a camel, a rabbit to be on the same table as things he could eat meant that all of it was unclean to him. He'd rather starve.

In the same way, this is exactly what the Pharisees and Jewish leaders were doing with the Gentiles. No Gentile was good enough, no exceptions could be made, they were throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Those undesirable, unclean Gentiles had no place among good Jewish society if they couldn't follow the strictest of standards.

That thinking right there is the problem. It's not the food we take in that makes us unclean, but what comes out of us that makes us unclean. That way of thinking... (EM) "those unclean people over there don't deserve grace..." **that's** unclean, that's impure. That's not what God desires.

That thinking is a perversion of God's ways, and they are born of the sinfulness of our own pride and prejudice. This was never about food, this was always about God's amazing grace that was poured out to all humanity.

We don't get to judge people like that... to call them a sinner and deny them God's grace. We don't get to place arbitrary and stiff impositions on people wanting to give their hearts to God. Our seat is not the judgment seat, for we cannot see the heart... we cannot know the truth like God does.

We cannot call unclean what God has made clean and God, through Christ, has offered salvation to the Gentiles as much as any Jew. AMEN.