

AN OPEN INVITATION

Pastor Hubert, April 24, 2016 (Acts 11:1-18, John 12:31-35)



A 5-year old boy goes to a friend's house for a birthday party. As soon as he gets there, he goes right up to his friend's mother and says, "My mom says to tell you that I am allergic to nuts and to chocolate." The mom says, "Thanks, that's good to know. Now we have a cat here; are you also allergic to cats?" The five year old thinks for a moment, then replies, "I don't know... At my house we don't eat cats..."

This silly joke is a good illustration that there are some things we just *know*; we don't have to be told; we learned them from our parents and we taught them to our children, by simply telling them

or by showing them by example. For instance:

We go to church on Sunday;
Don't lie or steal;
If you say you will do something, you do it;
We take food to a home where someone's sick or grieving;
Be careful of big mean dogs;
Blame Toronto for everything that's wrong in NW Ontario;
In winter, dress in layers;
Drink lots of water on hot days;
Don't waste your money or your time.

They all sound like pretty good advice, don't they? What! You noticed that one about blaming far-away Toronto for everything that's wrong here? There's some truth in it, though. For some of us, we might just as well say "blame all people who are not from here". For others it could be "blame all people from the wrong families". For others it could be "blame all people who aren't Protestant"; or "folks who eat funny food", or "who can't speak English like we do". You get the idea: blame anyone who's different from us.

To understand why Peter's vision shook him so much, we need to know that the Jewish people had strict food laws. There were many, many laws saying which and why certain foods were "unclean"; foods that *other* people would eat, but faithful Jews would not because they believed they were different.

This was not discrimination or racism: Jews firmly believed that these so-called "purity laws" helped provide a clear sense of identity, which is very important if you wanted to survive as a small nation surrounded by many other nations that were much more powerful. These purity laws helped them claim their own place among the nations, saying, "This is what we are about."

Peter saw countless animals that Jews like him were not permitted to raise or eat - and he is appalled that he is told to eat them. As a faithful Jew he cannot imagine doing that. But then it becomes clear that this dream is a metaphor, a symbol. He realizes that this dream is not just

about food, it's about people. He realizes that the dream is about throwing open the doors of the Christian community, open it up to everyone, no matter their race or traditions or language. All people were to be welcomed into this new community that followed Christ.

At the very beginning these Christ followers was a Jewish group within traditional Jewish society. Since the Jewish people were the ones who had hoped for the Messiah it seemed logical to them that all Gentiles (= non-Jews) wanting to convert had to become Jewish first.

So this vision is not really about diet, and Peter knew it. This vision was not saying, hey, go ahead, eat everything in sight. This vision was about *people*. The message is clear: for God, there are no "clean" and "unclean" people - God's people and not-God's-people. For God, there are only - people. And that means, God wants us to welcome *everyone* into the community of faith, regardless of their background and traditions - and regardless of *our* own background and traditions.

As Christianity began to grow during its first century, the apostles had many heated debates whether only Jews could be followers of Christ, or whether anyone could. Because don't forget, Jesus was a Jew working exclusively among Jews. Peter's vision was part of a growing awareness that Christ never excluded anyone, even non-Jews, so in the end it was decided that *anyone* could be a follower of Christ, anyone could be part of the Christian family of faith, Jew and Gentiles alike. And that's we are here today!

That was long ago; this is now. What does this have to do with us?

Well, maybe you remember the recent debate in our country about immigrants, particularly women from Arab countries, and headscarves! Should a Canadian resident be required to show one's head - or can they keep their old traditions? Should a Canadian resident have to eat our food? Should a Canadian resident be required to speak English or French? And with a new wave of immigrants coming to Canada, people are asking themselves those questions again.

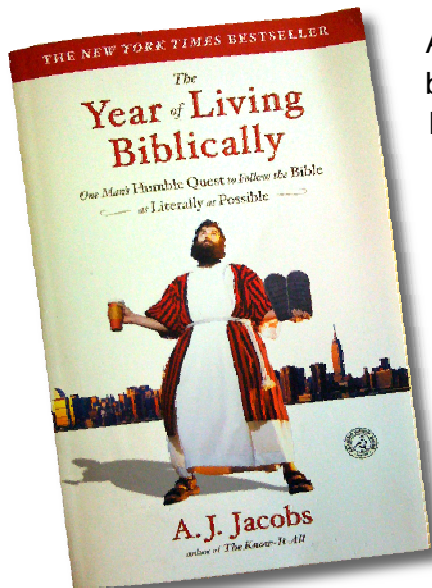
Many of those questions are based on fear, fear of people who are not like us. But how would we answer those questions if we hear them through the vision that Peter had, the vision that God wants us to welcome *everyone*, regardless of background and traditions, just the way they are...?

Now so far, we've been talking about how *we* see *others*. But how do *others* see *us*, the church? You'd be surprised. Marcus Borg, a well-known biblical scholar, says that his students have an almost universally negative view of Christianity and Christians, describing us as self righteous, backward, literalistic, judgmental and bigoted.

And on a smaller scale, when I talk to people who are not affiliated to a church (and that's the majority of the population these days) and they find out I'm not only a Christian but a minister even, the first thing I often hear is their anger at the church and their impatience with what they think is an outdated, superstitious, power- and money-hungry institution.

All of us here know that that is not the church, but unfortunately it is the kind of Christianity most people experience when they turn on their TV and watch yet another television evangelists try and get rich over gullible people's fears of others, whether Muslim or gay or Mexican or pacifist. If that were the church, I wouldn't be part of it, either. Thank God that's not the case.

Cherry-picking some of the Bible's commandments to exclude others, no matter who, is simply unbiblical and unacceptable.



A few years ago, an unusual book hit the New York Times bestsellers list: "A Year of Living Biblically". In it, a man of Jewish heritage decides to spend a year following as many of the rules of the Old Testament as possible. Not an easy task, because there are about one thousand of 'em! Now the one about not cutting his hair and not shaving was easy - even if it disturbed his wife. Avoiding bacon or cheese was tough, but do-able. Not shaking hands was awkward, but explainable.

But when it came to killing his children if they swore at their parents, he felt he couldn't do it. He also felt he couldn't kill magicians. And as for stoning of adulterers, he had to settle for small pebbles...!

You see his (and our) problem, right? How can we be people of principle and follow God's law - without being "out of touch" or bigoted? How can we hold a place for Holy Mystery - and still be intellectually honest? There is no easy answer for that, but we do know where starts: with the vision that Peter had to be open to those who come our way. It starts with Christ's commandment to simply love each other as Christ loved us. A love that knows no limits.

Easier said than done, though. Because if we really believe that and really live accordingly, then how come that almost everyone here is white middle class? Where are the poor and the underprivileged, where are the people who are different from us? Why are they not here...?

Our faith tells us that we are *all* created in God's image - pink or brown, white or black, short or tall, poor or wealthy, straight or gay, old and young, saints *and* sinners. We are called to be open to *all* our brothers and sisters, to welcome them in love and in the Spirit of Christ who came to show *everyone* the way to a full and abundant life. That's a tall order...

The bad news is that we'll never be able to do that; it's simply impossible, it can't be done. The good news is that if we ask the Spirit, we can do the impossible.

Amen!

(Readings for this Sunday are below)

Acts 11:1–18 (Peter's vision of unclean animals)

Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. "You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said.

Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. "I was in the town of Joppa," he said, "and while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of tame and wild animals, reptiles, and birds. And I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.'

"No, Lord,' I replied. 'I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure or unclean.'

"But the voice from heaven spoke again: 'Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.' This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven.

"Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry that they were Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon entered the home of the man who had sent for us. He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, 'Send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He will tell you how you and everyone in your household can be saved!'

"As I began to speak," Peter continued, "the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. Then I thought of the Lord's words when he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?"

When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, "We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life."

John 13:33–35 (A new commandment: love one another)

Dear children, I will be with you only a little longer. And as I told the Jewish leaders, you will search for me, but you can't come where I am going. So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other.

Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."