

Fifth Sunday after Easter  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
15 May 2022

Acts 11 :1-18

A very proper Don at a Louisiana Crawfish Boil. Back in 2014, Grace Church in Saint Francisville received a generous donation to do a theological symposium. We then decided that we would bring Dr. David Ford, Regent Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University and author of over 20 books on various issues of Theology. I then had the brilliant idea to invite a selected group of 60 people and cook a wonderful crawfish boil for David and his wife, Deborah, who was herself the daughter of a very famous American Theologian (Daniel H. Hardy) and an Anglican Priest well known in her own right. As luck would have it, the Fords' plane was delayed and by the time they arrived, I was in the back of the building, entertaining other guests. The Fords were soon given a beer and introduced to Crawfish for the first time in their lives, without much explanation as to how to eat the creepy crawlers and without warning about the spice level. Needless to say, this was a complete disaster. Within the first couple of minutes, David accidentally touched one of his eyes, not knowing about the danger of crawfish spice on the eye. What took place after this is a tale for another day, but let me just tell you that a local doctor was involved and I felt guilty for months. I almost incapacitated the Regent professor of Theology of Cambridge University. When I screw up, I really screw up!

You will know soon enough why I just told you this story. In the meantime, let us talk about "The other." We all have an image in our hearts and in our minds of who "the other" is. In literature "the other" has been pictured as the antithesis of the hero, the polar opposite, the antagonist. In comic books "the other" is usually the villain. The other can be seen as that person who is totally "not you" and in many ways as the "anti-you." We all know one of these people. People who stand for the opposite of what we stand for. People who like the very things we despise and behave in the opposite ways we behave. Let me give you an example. When I was growing up I had a "friend" who had the uncanny ability to make me insecure just about everything. He was as tall as I was short, she was as cunning as I was naive, he was as aggressive about everything in life as I was insecure, he was as handsome as I was average and unremarkable, he was as popular as I was a loner and a book-worm... You get my point.

When I first met this fellow I tried to compete with him in just about everything. But time after time, I was left in the dust of my own insecurity and anger as he enjoyed the spoils of war. He had better friends, better dates, more money, etc. Very soon I moved from competing with him to resenting him. I began to see him as "the other." I objected his lifestyle, I objected his flashy clothes, I found him shallow and arrogant, and I despised how he flaunted his wealth around. He and I were in the same youth group and later in the same seminary, which infuriated me because I felt he didn't belong there: He missed morning prayer most days; he never fasted during Lent; he didn't attend mass

daily as I and other holy people did; and he wasn't as concerned with the vow of celibacy as I and other people were. He became what was wrong with seminary and with the Church. I began to separate from him and by the time I left seminary, he was "the other."

The Gentiles were "the other." You remember that in the Old Testament God chose the people of Israel to be his own people and made covenants with them, gave them his holy Law, sent them prophets and rescuers, and gave them mighty kings. Every righteous Jew remembers this. They have been separated for the service of God from the beginning of creation. Not the Gentiles, but them! They were given God's law to regulate their interactions with each other and with God. The Law was God's gift to them and not to the Gentiles. They were given amazing festivals to give structure and meaning to their lives. Each of these festivals reminded the people of God's acts of love on their behalf. The Gentile nations were not given this gift of the Jewish festivals. This is a gift for them and them alone! They had developed all sorts of rituals to make themselves clean before God. They had rituals for the preparation of their meals, rituals for the washing of their cooking and eating utensils, rituals for the cleansing of their bodies and hands before meals, rituals to celebrate all major milestones in their lives (births, weddings, deaths, etc.) The nations ate with defiled, dirty hands, did not wash their cooking and eating utensils the same way the Jews did, and they invited dishonorable and sinful people to eat with them. In short: They did not obey God's law. To righteous Jews, the nations were "the other." They were the anti-Jew. The Gentiles were filthy sinners who could never have the same type of relationship with God the Jews had. They had no right to claim the Jewish God as their God. They had no right to want to belong to this family God had chosen for himself.

For the righteous Jew it was not lawful to befriend Gentiles, to have a meal with them, or even to enter into their homes. To do so was to betray both God and country. The Gentiles had enslaved the people of God on many occasions and even now, the Roman Empire was the oppressor. To associate with Romans and Greeks was the wrong thing to do. Yet today we have an interesting story in the Acts of the Apostles. Apparently, Peter went into the home of a gentile, ate with him and his household, prayed for them, witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon them, and then proceeded to baptize them. Peter had just opened the door for Gentiles to be accepted in large numbers into the new Christian movement.

You would expect the rest of the church in Jerusalem to be thrilled by the rapid spread of the Gospel, but they were very angry at Peter. The reading tells us, "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" They wanted to know why Peter associated with the enemy and welcome the enemy into the household of God, turning the enemy into a friend and opening the door for "the other" to become "just like us." This is no simple matter. The entire future of the new movement was at stake.

Now, before we discuss Peter's response, let me share with you my favorite movie

growing up, which I am sure it is the favorite movie for many of you. In the Sound of Music Julie Andrews teaches the Von Trapp family to sing, by saying, "Let's go to the very beginning, a good place to start, when you sing you start with do, re. mi." Well, this is what Peter does. Peter goes to the very beginning as he tells his church an interesting story: He was praying in Simon, the Tanner's house, he saw a great big mantle come down from heaven. In the mantle were animals of all types. Animals that Jews are not allowed to touch, let alone kill and eat. Then a voice came from heaven and said, "Peter, kill and eat!" Peter responded, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." Peter had been a righteous Jew all his life. He had followed the purity laws. Everything he ate was kosher. So, his refusal was understandable.

Peter tells his listeners that God responded saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times. The voice reminds Peter of creation itself. Even though the Jews had been given the Law and even though they had developed a list of foods that were profane and uneatable, this had not always been the case. At creation God declared that everything he has created was "good." This includes humanity whom God made in his own image. Peter had no right to call certain people profane or unclean. He had no right to determine who belonged and who did not belong to Christ. In Christ that goodness is restored as the sin which separated humanity from God has been forgiven. In Christ the debt is paid and humanity is promised a restoration to the original goodness they had in paradise. We can no longer make distinctions between Jew and Gentile. In Christ both enemies have been reconciled. Two polar opposites are brought into the same family and are loved in the same way. Ours then is not the job to say who belongs and who doesn't belong to God in Christ. Peter knows this well. He says to his listeners that the Holy Spirit fell upon those gathered in such a way that he knew God wanted to include them in the family. Peter says, "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

This is the question for us today, my friends. "Who are we that we could hinder God?" In Christ God makes possible the reconciliation of opposites. Think about those people you don't think belong to our church. Think about those folks you believe need to be kept out for the sake of the rest of us: the sinner, the impure, the criminal, the unorthodox, the weird (some of us find ourselves in this category. You know who you are!), those who look differently and behave differently. Today God is telling all of us, "Stop building walls of separation! Stop making distinctions between yourselves and others." Love others as I love you, even the weird in your midst!"

You may want to know that my childhood nemesis continues to outshine me. He is now a best-selling author, a well-recognized church leader in Colombia, and a friend to presidents and popes. I am no longer angry at him, however. I am grateful for his gifts. Besides, I know that he will never be as humble as I am...

May our Lord continue to bless you! Amen