

Sermon: "An Uncertain Church"
Acts 11:1-17

I open my sermon today with a couple of present-day examples of the story I just read from Acts. The first example I want to mention is real, it actually happened; the second is imaginary but still a very plausible scenario.

A few years back, at the National Cathedral in Washington, the pastor and evangelical leader Brian McLaren was the guest speaker at a public forum hosted by the Cathedral. His topic was "A New Kind of Christianity."

During the question and answer period after his talk, a man stood up and recited to McLaren this verse from John 14:6: "Jesus said to Thomas, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" The man read the verse in a challenging tone of voice, and then asked McLaren: "Is this Scripture true, or was Jesus a liar?" This all came up in the context of an earlier question-and-answer on Christian-Muslim dialogue. That's example 1.

The second episode is one I imagined after thinking long and hard about today's lesson from Acts. I'm sitting in a seafood restaurant, which I actually did a lot of during our recent vacation in Florida. As I'm pouring melted butter over my lobster, someone from the next table over comes and plops a Bible in front of me, open to the book of Leviticus. Read this, the man says, pointing to the 10th verse of chapter 11.

So I read: "Anything in the seas or the streams that does not have fins or scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and among all the other living creatures that are in the waters – they are detestable to you...of their flesh you shall not eat..." After I finish, I look up at the man and he asks me, "how do you feel now that you're about to violate God's law by eating that food in front of you?"

The focus of today's passage from Acts is spiritual struggle and pilgrimage. In the present-day church, the struggles we encounter on our pilgrimages we call doctrinal disputes, theological differences, or conflicting interpretations of scripture. In Acts, they didn't have doctrines or developed Christian theologies, and they had only one half of what we call the Bible, the writings of the Old Testament. But they had plenty of spiritual struggles, and what we read in many places in Acts are about the efforts those early Christians made to resolve them.

Peter returns to Jerusalem from Gentile territory and happily and proudly announces to the elders gathered there the successes he has met with in bringing new converts to the faith. His good news is met with stony silence and arched eyebrows, until someone finally asks: "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"

No "attaboy, Pete, way to go! We're going to put you in charge of our Gentile recruitment division!" Instead, a chilly rebuke and critique; a reproach from the elders to Peter that he has exceeded proper boundaries, ones that are anchored in Mosaic scriptural law regarding circumcision and food purity. The tension here is exactly the tension that McLaren faced at the National Cathedral, and that I faced in my imaginary seafood restaurant confrontation.

From one perspective, Scripture is a flat text that constitutes a rule book. Subsequent inspiration and revelation of God's will, if they conflict with the written word, don't count and can't be trusted, in the view of some. At the National Cathedral, the choice being given to McLaren was: either Jesus is literally the only way to salvation, or Jesus is a liar. There's no other possible understanding of God and his unveiling of Godself to us.

Which brings me to my fondness for shellfish, or pork chops for that matter. Every time I down one of those foods, I am in literal violation of Holy Scripture. Which precisely is the point Peter's critics are poking him in the chest about.

To his credit, Peter does not march off in a huff, maybe to start a separate denomination, one that will see things his way. No, Luke tells us, Peter responds by sharing a vision he had during prayer. He tells his miffed colleagues that he saw a great collection of animals gathered on a large sheet or carpet being lowered from heaven. And some of the animals on this sheet are those specified in the Torah as being forbidden to Jews.

With the vision comes a voice, saying: "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter, being the good Jew he is, says "Never, Lord; for nothing impure or unclean has ever entered by mouth." To which he hears this response, three times: "What God has made clean, you must not call impure."

So what is this? A latter day revelation that overrides or reinterprets earlier Scripture? A clever story by which Peter wins over his dim-witted opponents? Or is it an indication of a possible alternative to eating each other alive every time we are in dispute about the will of God? As Peter puts it at the end of this episode, "who was I that I could hinder God?" And the gathering of Jewish Christians find Peter's argument persuasive, and they relent.

It's all wrapped up tidily in this particular incident, but you only have to keep reading in Acts to know that this controversy over Gentile entry into the Christian movement – these pagans and all their impure behaviors – will come up again and again and again. For the early church, it is a nagging and divisive controversy. Sound familiar? It should, for the church has traveled this road many times since.

The lesson I think we draw from this is not to throw up our hands in exasperation at the stubborn persistence of this wayward opinion or that heretical faction. It's not to be drawn into no-win propositions, like the one that McLaren heard, that either Scripture is literally true or Jesus is a liar. It's not to reject books like Leviticus as collections of old wives' tales about the nature of creation and all that lives in it. The lesson, the teaching of Acts, is that we human beings are engaged in continuous spiritual pilgrimage, which has its moments of confusion and struggle, but also its breakthroughs of discernment and revelation. The fact that we wrestle with issues does not mean there is anything uncertain about God. But there is plenty that is uncertain about our grasp of God.

Today, we've moved on from the controversies that dogged Peter, Paul, and the early Christians. We've moved on to other issues: sexuality, wealth and poverty, stewardship of Earth's resources, war and peace – you know the list. People inside and outside the church speak with great certainty about these things, citing this authority or that Bible passage.

I myself don't trust a rigidly certain church, one for which all moral and ethical questions are black and white, were long ago decided, with answers printed indelibly in this source or that. That

sounds suspiciously like human arrogance. Again, it's not God that I doubt, it's us. The apostle Paul said, we see things as through a dark glass. The acuity of our moral vision is hindered by all sorts of impediments, not the least of which is our aversion to long, hard spiritual pilgrimage.

But most of all it's our reluctance to assume the posture of humility and obedience that we see in Peter's example today. The easy path for Peter would have been to take his lumps from his Jerusalem critics, agree with them, and throw the whole Gentile project overboard. That would have been surrendering to the "certainties" of human perspective. But he does not, he instead recognizes the certainty of God's sovereignty, and sensibly concludes: "who was I that I could hinder God?" Had Peter not reached that conclusion, the church as we know it, maybe even Christianity as we know it, might not exist.

So I'm all for an uncertain church, one that will disagree in faith and in hope, that will use the tools of humility and obedience demonstrated time and again in Acts, and that will commit, in the end, to a pilgrimage in the direction of what it senses to be God's will for it, and for the world. Amen.