

“The Spirit Told Me Not to Make a Distinction”

a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Acts 11:1-18
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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The artist’s depiction of Peter on the front of your worship guide is spot on. Unclean animals are descending, and Peter is cringing and shielding his eyes. “No! Don’t show me the bacon!” The pig appears to be taunting Peter with a smirk. Peter would have interpreted this vision as a temptation to falter, to sin, to break God’s command. In typical Peter fashion, he is adamantly opposed. “*By no means*, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has *ever* entered my mouth.”

Sounds just like Peter, doesn’t it? Remember at the Last Supper how he insisted, “You will never wash my feet,” and then of course, Jesus washed his feet. Peter often ends up eating his words. In this case, the Lord brings the vision three times before Peter is willing to consider it.

In today’s story, the circumcised believers criticize Peter for eating with uncircumcised men. I imagine the circumcised believers were prepared for an argument. “Peter, don’t you know what the Bible says?”

- Genesis 17:14, God said to Abraham, “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”
- Isaiah 52:1, “Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more.”
- Jeremiah 4:4, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts, O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else my wrath will go forth like fire and burn with no one to quench it, because of the evil of your doings.”
- Ezekiel 44:6-7, 9 “Thus says the Lord God, ‘O house of Israel, let there be an end to all your abominations in admitting foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple . . . You have broken my covenant with all your abominations . . . No foreigner, uncircumcised . . . shall enter my sanctuary!’”
- Peter, if have you any further doubts, Jesus himself was circumcised!

Peter does not begin by addressing their concerns directly. He mentions a sheet from the heavens, in which he saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air, and heard a voice, telling him to eat. Peter’s critics weren’t expecting to discuss dietary habits, but I’m sure they had an answer. “Leviticus 11! ‘All the creatures that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat, for they are detestable. You shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. This is the law pertaining to land animals and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.’”

Peter responds, “I know! That’s what I said! I’m just as much of a Leviticus nerd as you, I swear. But a *second* time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not

call profane.’ This happened *three* times. And then these Gentiles arrived from Caesarea, and the Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.”

Peter’s experience directly contradicts the law. The law demands a distinction between unclean and clean. Who should they trust: Peter or the law, a vision from the Spirit, or the Bible?

We need to understand that these weren’t just some obscure laws. These principles were at the heart and center of what it meant to be God’s people. In the years between the Old and New Testament, there’s a story from the book of Maccabees about King Antiochus who attacks the land of Israel and defiles the temple. To make matters worse, Antiochus orders the people to abandon their religious customs. “They were commanded to build pagan altars, temples, and shrines, and to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals there. They were forbidden to circumcise their sons and were required to make themselves ritually unclean in every way they could, so that they would forget the Law which the Lord had given through Moses and would disobey all its commands. The penalty for disobeying the king's decree was death.”

“Mothers who had allowed their babies to be circumcised were put to death in accordance with the king's decree. Their babies were hung around their necks, and their families and those who had circumcised them were put to death. But many people in Israel firmly resisted the king's decree and refused to eat food that was ritually unclean. They preferred to die rather than break the holy covenant and eat unclean food—and many did die.”

Eventually, “the strongest and bravest men in Israel” volunteered to defend the Law. They “went everywhere tearing down pagan altars and circumcising by force every uncircumcised boy they found within the borders of Israel . . . They rescued the Law of Moses from the Gentiles and their kings and broke the power of the wicked King Antiochus.” Their leader says, “You, my sons, must be devoted to the Law and ready to die to defend God's covenant . . .”

So, you see, it was not only the prophets and Moses who spoke out against the uncircumcised and the eating of unclean animals. It also a strong part of the tradition, the folklore, and the memory of the people that what separated the righteous from the unrighteous, the brave man from the coward, the holy man from the renegade was faithful adherence to these particular laws. Forsaking them went hand-in-hand with forsaking other important customs and commandments.

How is Peter’s strange little vision supposed to stand up to all of that? Even if Peter’s vision is to be trusted, isn’t it a big leap to connect the vision about animals and dining habits to the matter of circumcision? And if we start eating unclean animals, wouldn’t that open the door to all sorts of lawlessness and evil? Wouldn’t the law become irrelevant altogether? Why would anyone ever believe Peter over the sacred Scriptures?

Next Peter tells what happened when he encountered the Gentiles. “The Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

At this, his critics are silenced. They cannot argue with the evidence of the Spirit. Peter’s bizarre vision and his experience with Cornelius ends up launching a movement of Gentile inclusion that

sweeps the early church, though it takes awhile to convince everyone. Paul has to write about it many times in his letters. It can be hard to imagine just how big of a deal this was at the time.

I am wondering how many of you eat the meat of unclean animals like pork or beef? (Raise your hand.) How many of you are not Jewish, but Gentile? It seems like we've gotten past this New Testament discussion, and I've just wasted a lot of your time defending a story that none of us are troubled by anymore. Apparently most of us no longer lay awake at night fretting about Peter's disregard for Scripture. With the exception of a few vegetarians in the room, we no longer worry about the moral dangers of eating meat. We do not fear the slippery slope of a lax position on circumcision, and I won't ask you to raise your hands about whether you're obeying the law on that one. If we are no longer worried about it, then these stories have largely lost their relevance to our lives, right? Peter and Paul's many appeals to welcome the uncircumcised no longer matter, really. It's over and past. We no longer care . . .

Unless the sacred stories of our sacred Scriptures continue to have meaning and significance for our lives as we interpret the stories in our modern context. You're an astute bunch, so perhaps you see where I'm going with this. We've been hosting "Compassionate Conversations about LGBTQ Lives" on Wednesday nights at Lake Shore, and this is the truth: I had no intentions to preach about these conversations. I genuinely thought the best, most pastoral approach would be to leave the conversation to the church and not insert my own opinions too strongly or too often. But then, this text about Peter's conversion was the lectionary passage for today, and I could not find a way around it. To be honest, I like it that most all of you seem to like me so far, and I'd rather not upset any of you. So I recognize that while some of you will be glad for this sermon, others of you are going to wish we'd move on already. Some of you may feel I'm pushing the issue, others will think I'm preaching to the choir, and still others may be very uncomfortable that we're talking about this at all. I do hope you will talk to me later so I can listen to you too, but for now I'm up here, tasked by God to say something useful about this text, and I truthfully cannot read this story from the book of Acts without remembering my own conversion. I feel the only faithful way to handle this text is to tell you my story.

First, a caveat—this is not a story strictly about LGBTQ inclusion. It's really a story about something else, but that might not be clear until the end. Anyway, here it goes, the story of my three visions:

I'll start by saying I was definitely raised to believe same sex relationships were a sin. For most of my life, I didn't question this. I remember seeing a same-sex couple in a restaurant, and someone in my family saying, "That's so gross." For the most part, you didn't see a lot of same-sex couples in Oklahoma. If my memory is correct, I think we were out of state on vacation when we saw that couple. My uncle was a gay man who died of AIDS when he was 25 and I was 3, but other than that, I didn't really know any gay people. The first time a friend of mine started dating other women, I was in college, and I prayed for her regularly, that God would save her. In her presence, I tried to be nonjudgmental and loving, but secretly I prayed.

By the time I got to seminary, I grew increasingly empathetic to the struggles of gay Christians. I began to wonder what I would do, if a same-sex couple asked me to marry them. It seemed that bound to happen someday, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to impose my morals on

someone else, but I wasn't sure I could use the authority of the church to bless a marriage that might be sinful. I was really afraid of making a mistake and doing the wrong thing.

It was early in my pastoral ministry when my first vision from God came. A woman I knew from seminary asked to talk. She was still in school, and she felt called by God to be a pastor, but she was worried that as a Baptist woman in Texas, no church would ever hire her. As a Baptist woman myself, I could empathize. However, the look on her face as she talked to me seemed uncharacteristically distressed, and I had the sense there was more she wasn't telling me. Finally the rest of the story came out: she was gay. She wasn't even in a relationship with anyone and didn't know if she ever would be, but still, she was gay, and she didn't know whether she should tell the churches where she interviewed in order to be honest or should she hide the truth so that she could get a job? She was so torn up. I cannot explain what happened next other than to say I experienced a conversion. I had been studying the biblical texts for some time, but in that moment I had a Holy Spirit moment that transcended my theological mind, like a voice coming from heaven as clear as day, as if to say about my friend, Erica Lea, "This is my daughter, in whom I am well pleased." I knew beyond doubt that I was called to love and support her, embrace and affirm her as God's child, as a gay person called by God to the Gospel ministry.

That was my first vision. My second vision happened in Portland, Oregon when my good friend Aurelia agreed to perform a flash wedding for her Aunt Tina. If you don't know what a flash wedding is, you invite people at the last minute and plan the whole wedding in about a week. So many friends and neighbors jumped in to help, the wedding was a huge success with guests laughing and dancing until the wee hours of the night. Despite the quick wedding, the decision to get married was not at all rash. Tina and London had been together for 18 years, but until very recently, it hadn't been legal in Oregon for them to get married. When their niece, Aurelia, a minister, came to visit, the time seemed right, and they had their wedding. It was one of the most joyous, happy events I've ever attended, but I had to excuse myself to an empty room and cry. I cried and I cried—could not stop crying. Because at this point in my life's journey, I knew so many people who had been abused by their spouses or partners, and it struck me as

overwhelmingly horrific that an abuser can marry again and again with nothing in the ^{*} way, no obstacles at all for obtaining a marriage license, while two wonderful women like Tina and London, full of generosity, compassion, and integrity could not be together in a legal way for 18 long years, no matter how much they loved each other, respected and cared for one another, no matter how committed and faithful they were. I knew from personal experience what sexual perversion was, because I had been it's victim, and what Tina and London had was quite obviously not a perversion but something good and wholesome. I saw in that moment the fierce injustice of it all. I want to be exceedingly clear that I am very much *against* sexual sin. What I am suggesting is that our culture's obsession with other people's sexual identity has distracted us from combating the real, prevalent, and devastating evils of sexual assault, rape, abuse, the

* In the original version of this sermon, I said "his" way, but as a congregant gently reminded me, women can be abusers too. Statistics tell us that men are abusers far more often than women, which I think is important to note because in my view this fact is connected to the ongoing prevalence of sexism and misogyny in our world today. However, I do sincerely apologize to anyone reading or listening to this sermon who has been abused by a woman and thus felt overlooked by the use of a gender-specific pronoun.

trafficking of persons, the objectification of women's bodies, and the exploitation of children. If you want to talk about sin, please, start there.

My third vision unfolded more slowly in my budding friendship with Cathy and Diana, two of the most authentic, admirable, and trustworthy people I know. They are dedicated parents to their four adopted children and one grandchild. I often find myself envying their marriage because they've learned how to support one another so well. We would all be blessed to find and maintain a relationship like Cathy and Diana's. Their life has many challenges, but they know how to stick together and remain true to themselves. Knowing them has taught me that the LGBTQ community not only deserves our empathy and understanding and support, they deserve our respect and admiration. We could learn a lot from them because they have endured so much criticism, dismissal, and slander, and yet so many of them have endured with grace and mercy. They know how to persevere despite great setbacks and hurdles, how to keep loving even under the threat of violence. They know intimately what it would be like to walk in Jesus' shoes, despised and rejected; or perhaps Jesus knows intimately what it is like to walk in theirs.

Friends, I have absolutely, unequivocally been converted through the movement of the Holy Spirit and the witness of relationships to understand that we are to make no distinction between our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and ourselves. No distinction. We might worry that we are abandoning the Bible or opening the door to sinful, lawless behavior, but we are not. For the Holy Spirit has fallen upon our gay, lesbian, and transgender brothers and sisters just as surely as it has fallen upon us. The fruits of the Spirit are evident in their lives, and we can respond by praising God that this is so. They no longer need to be condemned for an identity they did not choose. They no longer must cut off a part of who they are in order to belong.

They are holy, just as we are made holy by the grace of God. How do we know whether God has called them clean? We know because God has favorably bestowed God's spirit on their lives, and what God calls clean, we must not call profane. There is *so much more* I could say. But alas, I have to wrap this up sometime.

I wonder if the early church worried about how much Paul and Peter talked profusely about Gentiles and circumcision. Didn't that seem like a secondary issue to the death and resurrection of the Christ? Wasn't it a little uncomfortable to discuss male genitalia so much and sometimes in the context of worship? Weren't they worried that if they talked about it too much, they would become a one issue church, known only for welcoming the uncircumcised Gentile rather than being known for other things, like their care for the orphan and widow?

I told you this wasn't strictly about LGBTQ lives, and it isn't. It is a story about the radical nature of the Gospel and our never-ending need to be converted. The matter of LGBTQ inclusion will never be the one and only issue. We will have to do this hard work of being changed over and over again. As I've been working with the Community Race Relations Coalition in Waco and learning more about the lynching culture, I am in the process of being converted, and this is how it goes. We keep getting shocked, keep reconsidering our stances and positions, keep listening to people who are different from us, keep loosening our grip on what we thought was certain and enter new phases in the life of the church again and again. Annie Dillard says we ought to be wearing crash helmets to church. We ought to hope we would be so fortunate as

Peter as to be bombarded with visions from heaven, that if we ignore them or resist them the first time, they just keep coming.

I have told you my conversion story, though I hope it is only one of many. What will our conversion story be? When we are criticized for living out our convictions, what story will we tell in response? I hope it's at least as interesting as a smirking pig mocking us from a heaven-sent bed sheet. Put on your crash helmets, folks. We're about to encounter God.