



***The Gift of Interpretation***  
**A Sermon for Northminster Church**  
**Preached by Claire Helton**  
**May 19, 2019**

*Acts 11:1-18*

Now the apostles and the believers<sup>[a]</sup> who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God.<sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers<sup>[b]</sup> criticized him,<sup>3</sup> saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"<sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,<sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me.<sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.<sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'<sup>8</sup> But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'<sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.'<sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.<sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were.<sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.<sup>[c]</sup> These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.<sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter;<sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.'<sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.<sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'<sup>17</sup> 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?"<sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

There is a scene in the 1975 British comedy *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* that just tickles me every time, and it comes to mind fairly often given my line of work. It's the scene where King Arthur and his knights, with all their swords and armor, are facing a killer bunny. (I know that sounds like it should be the punchline of this story but it's really just the setup.) So in deciding

how to combat the killer bunny, the knights are discussing what weapons they have available, and Lancelot remembers that Brother Maynard, a monk who is traveling with them, keeps a collection of holy relics, one of which is the “holy hand grenade.” So they decide to use it, but they need some instruction on how it works, and Arthur asks them to consult the “Book of Armaments.” So the monk stands up and, in a cadence that we recognize all too well, he reads from the holy book: “And the Lord spake, saying, ‘First shalt thou take out the Holy Pin. Then, shalt thou count to three, no more, no less. Three shall be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three. Four shalt thou not count, nor either count thou two, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Five is right out! Once the number three, being the third number, be reached...” and it goes on.

It’s funny because it’s familiar, right? The excessive specificity of the rules? The Book of Armaments is not one of the books in our Bible, but it would fit right in with the rest of the Pentateuch. Our story today only makes sense if we remember that for centuries this kind of over-the-top particularity of what was acceptable for daily living was the norm in Jewish culture, especially when it came to food. Holiness was not so much a spiritual state as it was a physical one; although, the ancients probably would have bristled at our insistence on separating the two.

Our story today begins when Peter walks into a hostile room. It wasn’t the sort of hostility that greets a man walking into a room full of his enemies. It was the hostility that greets a man walking into a room full of his own brothers and sisters who believe deeply that he has gone astray, who feel compelled to explain to him his error: to fix him. Can you feel that tension? It went without saying that the early Christians were Jews; Jesus had focused his ministry explicitly on the “lost sheep of Israel” (his words). Peter was a devout Jew and until he was confronted with a vision from God I doubt it had ever crossed his mind that there might be a place in this community for Gentiles, for non-Jews. Now Peter’s Jewish brothers have heard the news that Gentiles have been brought into the fold, that they have decided to follow Jesus. They could have responded with curiosity about how the Gentiles might have come to that somewhat surprising decision, or with gratitude and wonder at the mysterious expansiveness of God’s love. But they didn’t respond; they reacted. And when we react often fear is our driving motivation.

What were they afraid of? Was it the prospect of change? Change is almost always an underlying fear though it's not usually the one people are able to name for themselves. I wonder what they called it instead. When they held their secret meetings, when they gossiped over shared meals about the Gentile rumors from Caesarea, how did they cloak the fear of change to make it palatable? I imagine it took shape as a righteous hesitation about impurity, a concern over where, if they allowed the Gentiles in, they would draw the line. We are so often preoccupied with drawing lines, aren't we? The fear goes something like this: if we let them in, or, if we allow them to lead, will we lose our sense of distinction that is the foundation of our corporate identity, will we lose what makes us "us"?

So now Peter has the task of convincing them that the only moral thing they can do is to change their minds. And so, he tells them the story of how he changed his own. "I saw, of all things, a tablecloth coming down from heaven," he says, "and on it were four-footed animals of every kind." Four-footed animals may not sound like much of a problem to us; we don't live by Levitical law. But let me read for you just a sampling of the laws Peter and his Jewish audience would have been bound by:

*The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: <sup>2</sup> Say to the Israelites: These are the creatures that you are allowed to eat from the land animals: <sup>3</sup> You can eat any animal that has divided hoofs, completely split, and that rechews food. <sup>4</sup> But of animals that chew food and have divided hoofs you must not eat the following: the camel—though it rechews food, it does not have divided hoofs, so it is unclean for you; <sup>5</sup> the rock badger—though it rechews food, it does not have divided hoofs, so it is unclean for you; <sup>6</sup> the hare—though it rechews food, it does not have divided hoofs, so it is unclean for you; <sup>7</sup> the pig—though it has completely divided hoofs, it does not chew food, so it is unclean for you. <sup>8</sup> You must not eat the flesh of these animals or touch their dead bodies; they are unclean for you.*

And further on,

*Of the birds, the following are the ones you must detest—they must not be eaten; they are detestable: the eagle, the black vulture, the bearded vulture, <sup>14</sup> the kite, any kind of falcon, <sup>15</sup> any kind of raven, <sup>16</sup> the eagle owl, the short-eared owl, the long-eared owl, any kind of hawk, <sup>17</sup> the tawny owl, the fisher owl, the screech owl, <sup>18</sup> the white owl, the scops owl, the osprey, <sup>19</sup> the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe, and the bat.*

*And three shall be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three.*

It's easy for us find humor in the tedium of these overly specific and seemingly arbitrary rules about which food counts as "clean" and which is "unclean." It's always easier to laugh at someone else's sacred cows. A friend shared a story just this week about a church he used to be a part of which had some sacred cows of its own – rather than unclean food, their concern was inappropriate dress. "In college," he said, "I joined a church with eleven members. I was shocked to learn later that, just a few years before, the church had been packed out and thriving, but they had an acrimonious falling out over whether hats could be worn in the sanctuary. Come to find out the youth pastor had been ministering to the local teens who were largely Latino and African American, and they came to church in their everyday clothes." Which included hats.

Our vision can become so clouded when we forget what it is that we are about. When we forget what we are about, it's like we forget how to be human – how to empathize with our fellow humans...who sometimes wear hats.

Last week Zach preached about the way we engage with the Bible, asking it questions it may or may not have ever been meant to answer. The questions we ask of scripture are a part of our interpretive lens, our hermeneutic. You can think of a hermeneutic as the glasses you wear, the lens you use, when you're reading the Bible. Our reading of scripture is always, always necessarily colored by our hermeneutical lens. Our task is to become aware of which glasses we're wearing, and to determine whether (and how) they might be distorting our view. Interpretation is a gift. By that I mean a few things. I mean that it is something some folks seem to have a natural inclination toward while others prefer to have their interpreting done for them (even though

that's not really one of the options). But more than that, I mean that interpretation is a gift we have been given, it is a gift that we have the privilege and the responsibility of bringing with us any time we engage the reading of scripture.

Peter had to change his lenses. God gave him a vision, and it was crystal clear, and when the vision was over and he put back on the lenses he had been using to look at, to conceive of, the world he thought he was living in, he realized those lenses were far too small.

Interpretation is a gift; it is also a responsibility. God could have given Peter a vision of a synagogue opening its doors and allowing Gentile humans to walk in; that would have been straightforward enough. Instead, Peter had a vision about a picnic blanket with pigs on it. He had to do the work of interpretation; and he had to make a choice based on his experience: based on what he knew of God, on what he had learned from Jesus, on what he sensed was right. Peter had a vision about food; and then three Gentiles showed up on his doorstep, and it became a vision about people. That's when the hermeneutical work began. And it couldn't stop with him. This is how Peter changed his mind.

And when he changed his mind, and when the church in Jerusalem accepted his interpretation, they established a momentum for the direction of the church that would bring us to where we are today.

It is because of that interpretation that most of us are able to walk in these doors today, that we have found a home in this family of God, because few of us can claim a Jewish ancestry. We are Gentiles, and thank God we are here. And in a less literal but perhaps more significant way, it is because of Peter's interpretation that I am in this church today. (That many of us are.) I am here because I sense in the story and the witness of Christ, the story and the struggling and the working out of the faith of the early church a momentum that leads us, that calls us toward freedom, toward inclusion, toward love. This story from Acts 10-11 of Peter's vision is one that has been used – and rightly so – by many in recent days who have sought to provide a biblical basis for a church that welcomes and affirms beloved children of God of all sexual identities and gender

expressions. It was used half a century ago to advocate for the de-segregation of Christian houses of worship, which somehow had convinced themselves that God was honored in their separating out of black and white.

That old fear – the fear that if we let “them” in, whoever “they” are, we’ll lose what it is that makes us “us” – that fear has no place in the church of God. And I’ll tell you why. It’s because of this story. It’s because the thing that makes us “us” is that we never shut the door. There is no “letting in” because we do not have a doorkeeper. God has not only swung the doors open wide but removed them entirely from their hinges. What God has called clean, let no one call unclean. Thanks be to God, all are welcome here.

We say it week after week. And we mean it. ...Until we don’t.

The day comes (it always comes) when someone wants to come in and we don’t want them here. I don’t know when that day will be for you. I pray that it won’t come for me but I am sure that it will. And on that day, here is our work: to become aware of which glasses we’re wearing and to determine how they are distorting our view. Even when we think we have put on the widest possible lens, there is always a chance there is someone on the margins we’re not seeing. If we as a church are appealing to our sacred texts as a touchstone for guiding our living, then this story calls us to constant vigilance about which parts of our own experience we are bringing to bear on our hermeneutic, our interpretation. We have to keep on examining them, and we have to be willing to admit when it might be time for a new pair of glasses.

So, Northminster: May the example of the early church daring to change their minds shape our imaginations for seeing the way forward, and may the love of Christ ever and always be the lens we wear.

Amen.