

PASTORAL PRAYER

Endless, unlimited, living God, this day is the day you have made. In it, you see all possibilities as we reach for fulfillment, for joy, for eternal meaning. We give thanks that you walk with us as we reach and seek as very human people for the everlasting gifts, but more often than not, we reach without you. We acknowledge you are a God that does not tell us to walk alone, who does not leave us be as people to search by themselves, even when we seem to live it out in practice. You are the constant companion, ever-calling us to follow your calling and calling us even when we deny it.

In the time of Acts, there were certain boundaries that the people thought were fixed and ever changing. The coming of your Holy Spirit among the Gentiles showed how boundless and free your Spirit is to move among us. Guide us to reflect and remember that your Spirit goes where it will and does as it will to always glorify you. Guide us to see in our reading of scripture how you bring newness into the world through the Spirit's guide. Remind us that Scripture always points to you and your Son Christ Jesus, in whom all scripture comes to be fulfilled and live among us. You remind us time and time again not to call unclean what you have made clean. May we never disgrace your creation by acting as the superior, when you are the source and caretaker of all. We pray all these things in the name of Christ Jesus, the source and hope of our faith forevermore, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

When I was really young, one of the highlights of my day was coming home from school and turning on The Family Channel. There, every afternoon, was the original 1960s series "Batman." Adam West and Burt Ward played Batman and Robin, respectively, fighting against evil criminals like the Riddler, the Joker, the Penguin, the Mad Hatter, and

so many more. I just thought it was the neatest thing on TV, and I was super excited to go to the store and see if there were any Batman action figures. I would play with them so much that they would easily break, so I'd have to get another one.

Go forward, say 15 years, I managed to catch the 1960s Batman show on late at night. What I had remembered definitely wasn't the same anymore. Batman, once the coolest thing on TV, was now super-cheesy. The acting was, well, substandard, the fights seemed really contrived, and I could do nothing but laugh. Batman sounded more like someone who wanted to give you a cheesy sermon than the cool crime fighter I remembered. The villains were goofy and comical. It didn't have the same effect anymore.

Some things fit for one time don't necessarily work for another. I grew up thinking the 1960s interpretation of Batman was pretty cool, but as I grew older, I became more interested in the complexities and questions raised by the new Dark Knight interpretation of Batman. What once was food for my growth became empty, and something else had to take its place. What works for one time doesn't always work for another time. It works with us; it works with the way that God interacts with us. We can never put God in a box, for when we do, we will be surprised. God can call out something that once as meaningful as now harmful. God can call what was once unclean clean. That leaves us with the necessity to keep open eyes and open ears to see how the Spirit moves. The Holy Spirit brought about significant change, and Peter was left reeling. Jesus spoke a new truth that seemed groundbreaking to those hearing it.

Peter here seems like he's in a dilemma. He speaks about this special vision where he sees all these animals that were declared by the Levitical law to be unclean. That is, these animals should never be eaten. They were considered abhorrent. He needs to stay

away from them if he is to remain faithful to his understanding of religion. At the same time, he hears a voice, the voice of God, calling to him: "Get Up, Peter; kill and eat." He reacts as any faithful person would: "By no means, Lord" (which happens to be one of the most strong ways to say no in the Bible). "For nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." That's not good enough; the voice repeats itself. "Kill and eat." And a third time. Peter has had a profound experience of what is profane and what is not. And, it appears, his perspective must change. What we thought was unclean may not necessarily be so, and the Holy Spirit appears to be the driving force behind this change.

This vision happens right after Peter preached to a man named Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Peter recounts how he had this dream to his companions right before he met with Cornelius. God spoke to Cornelius and told him to seek out Peter. Peter had a choice: does he stick with his understanding of scripture or does he follow the calling of the living Spirit, who is speaking something new? He chooses the latter, and his companions in the faith agree: the Holy Spirit is doing something new, something unexpected. The Holy Spirit has come upon the Gentiles. The message and favor of God, which once was thought to be only among the Jews, is no longer the case. The Gospel has come to the Gentiles, and they can now fully accept it and be considered equally faithful with the Jews. To us, this is no big deal. We understand now that the Gospel is for all people, no matter what. To this audience, this is big, huge, game-changing news.

This story and the story from the Gospel of Matthew go hand-in-hand. In Matthew, there is this strong push for what was thought to be right among the Pharisees. It was really important to what goes in your mouth; the scripture says so! The Pharisees get a bad reputation among Christians today, and quite unfairly, mind you. They did exactly what we

would do today: if there's a challenge to what we think is true, they go back to Scripture to refute the argument. It's what we would consider right and faithful. On the other hand, they aren't just having a theological disagreement, they're arguing with Jesus. Jesus is saying that a wrote understanding of scripture is not enough. They want the word of the law, but they are denying the spirit of the law in that understanding. They are so fixed on what they understand from scripture, they forget that God is greater than the written words of scripture. Now a-days, it seems like absolute foolishness to argue against Jesus, but now we understand that he has something in his arsenal that the old understandings of the scriptures cannot stand up against: Jesus is the living Word.

We have a new standard set here. Sometimes we equivocate the written scripture to the Living Christ, but Jesus himself is the living word. The bible is meant to guide us, but it does not exist in a vacuum. It was written in a certain time and a certain place, so it has certain details that only really apply to those certainties. Therefore, there are certain things we take from scripture and certain things we leave behind. There are statements in scripture that we recognize are nothing more than a part of that time. In Leviticus, it says it is improper for faithful people to wear clothing made of multiple fibers. If that's still the case, we are all sinners today. It also says in Leviticus 11 that whatever is in the sea that does not have scales and fins is an abomination and should not be eaten. Had shrimp lately? If we go strictly by Leviticus, then we are in the wrong when we eat shrimp. If that's the case, Catherine and I have multiple charges against us this last week. It says in the New Testament that we should have our heads covered when we go into worship. I'm seeing several sinners right now. If we judge exclusively by the scripture, then we are all sunk. But we do not live by scripture alone, just as we do not live by bread alone. We discern

scripture with the ongoing influence of the Spirit. What made the young church of Acts so dynamic is that they saw how the Spirit was speaking newness into the depths of Scripture. What was unclean by the words of scripture became clean by the cleansing life of the Holy Spirit.

That leaves us with the ongoing question that we must ask ourselves continuously. What are we calling unclean that God calls clean? Sometimes we judge because that keeps us safe. Sometimes we judge because we are considering ourselves superior and worthy to judge others. What are we calling unclean that God calls clean? We consider ourselves naturally on God's side when we call ourselves Christian but sometimes act in ways that do not demonstrate the gospel. What are we calling unclean that God calls clean? People struggle daily to get a job and take care of their families, but while they can't get it done no matter how hard they try, the easy way to go is to say they are lazy. What are we calling unclean that God calls clean? We want to despair in humanity's state when the two Boston Bombers struck, but what does humanity look like when we compare the two bombers to the hundreds of people that provided first response and generosity after the fact? What are we calling unclean that God calls clean? We call people guilty simply because they are standing trial so, therefore, must be guilty, but many we find vindicated later based on DNA evidence. What are we calling unclean that God calls clean? That is a startling and life-changing question. Indeed, Peter experienced something new, when he realized that it doesn't matter what we say or what we do; it always comes down to the judgment of God. The Spirit comes to be a guide that breathes newness into everything and sometimes shows we are calling unclean what God is calling clean. I'm human, I don't always live up to my own expectations and standards, but because of this simple fact, I'm called to leave

judgment of others and their ways not up to me but up to someone much more qualified.
His name is Jesus.

Are we confining the Gospel in some way? Are we presuming that the Spirit can only go this way or that? The Spirit, we saw, actually overturned Scripture in who is acceptable before God. This doesn't mean that we abandon Scripture but that we see that newness comes within the familiar. Scripture is not an end in itself but instead points us to the man of Jesus Christ, in whom all scripture is fulfilled and comes to life. Scripture presents us with threads that speak for all time, while leaving some of the details to be temporary, of the moment. It is not considered a sin to eat shrimp, wear clothing of different fibers, or to enter worship with our heads covered any more. That doesn't matter to the point of the Gospel. What does matter, what does help us claim what is truly clean for all time, is to validate our actions with love, as Christ loved and continues to love us. Let us let the Spirit move within us to work with Scripture to discern what God is speaking to us today, for every day has its new calling. God is always saying something new for new ages and new circumstances. Let us seek to not call unclean that God has made clean.
Amen and Amen.