

A Story Worth Telling Twice

Acts 11: 1-18

11 Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers^a criticized him, 3 saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 “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. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ 8 But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. 13 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; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 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.’ 17 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?” 18 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.”

Have you ever heard the same person tell you the same story twice? We listen to stories, but occasionally, it’s the same story over and over. When it happens, we might ask questions: “Is everything okay?” “Are they getting forgetful?” “Is this a big story in their life? I noticed I do it too sometimes, so I have started saying, “Stop me if you’ve heard this one!” The story we just heard in scripture is one that Luke tells twice—only one chapter apart. It’s a hint: this is a big story. But perhaps we have missed how truly big it is. We have interpreted it as a moment when God is including others. We have said it is a moment when God’s love is bigger than our own group. It’s all true, but the story is far more radical than meets the eye, which is probably why Luke tells it twice.

We know the story. After a long day, Peter takes a nap. He has a vision where a sheet falls from the sky with unclean objects on it. Peter thinks he’s being tested: “Oh, I’d never eat that! I’m faithful!” he says. But it turns out it’s not a test, but God wiggling God’s way into the cracks of our hearts to open up something new. Peter is told to go to Cornelius. Now who was Cornelius? Yes, he was a gentile, but more he was a centurion for the “Italian cohort.” Which is a nice way of saying he is a Roman soldier. What was a Roman soldier’s job? To keep the peace through intimidation and force. To occupy the land. To repress Jewish folks who fell out of line...like Jesus did. Cornelius was the epitome of unclean. A soldier cashed dirty empirical paychecks. They had blood on their hands. It’s a big moment where Peter is asked to be inclusive to more than merely a gentile. He’s being asked to witness to God’s love for the oppressor.

Now, here's where things get confusing. It says Cornelius is faithful. He's a God-fearing person. A generous person. It's confusing because it would seem to me, that anyone who cashes a paycheck by working for the oppressive regime, cannot be a God-fearing person. In my mind it is hard to imagine someone who believes in the exclusion of others as being faithful. It's hard to think of someone who works for the oppressor as generous, isn't it? Yet, there are people who I don't agree with theologically who are doing serious justice work in our city. I've experienced the radical generosity of others only to realize they voted for someone different than I did. And it is confusing. It disrupts the black and white categories we are hard-wired to form. It's a jumbo slice of humble pie when someone from the other side is a genuine person. Cornelius works for the oppressor, but he is also faithful and generous person. And the Holy Spirit falls on their group just like she did on ours. So what do we do with that?

Now here's the kicker. It's a detail we might miss it if we blink. Peter tells the council that he was in the city of Joppa praying. Now where have we heard of Joppa before? Ah, yes! The Book of Jonah—you remember Jonah? It begins this way: The word of God came to Jonah saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, and preach to them!" But instead, Jonah set out to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. He *went down to Joppa and found a ship to Tarshish* where he fled, away from the presence of the Lord." Peter is in Joppa, at the same crossroad where Jonah was. Jonah hears God's word to bring repentance which leads to life to the Ninevites, and he runs the other way. Peter hears God's word and says, "who am I to hinder the new thing God is doing?" It's a repeat of the same crossroad moment. The question: do we live into our own categories of who belongs, or our own? I mean, can you honestly think of anyone who has ever changed their mind by being judged? No. Now can you think of anyone who has changed their mind by being told they belong?

One of my seminary professors wrote about a vivid dream he recently had. He dreamt he was in the back seat of a limousine when he realizes that sitting across from him is Vladimir Putin! They start chatting but then Putin directs the driver to pull down a heavy black curtain separating them from the rest of the car for privacy. Putin then asks, "Why are you here?" To which the professor replies, "I've been praying for you." Putin looks skeptical so he says, "No, really. I've been talking to God...asking God to give you wisdom and the courage to make the right decisions." Putin's demeanor softens and just as the professor was about to ask Putin how they could stay in contact, he wakes up from the dream.

Except, here's the thing: He said he hasn't been praying for Putin at all. He hasn't thought about praying for Putin. Putin is a war criminal who has blood on his hands. He spreads propaganda and lies. He is the epitome of unclean. But what the professor realized is that by making Putin the caricature of evil, the stand in for Hitler, and by demonizing him, we risk pushing him further into the darkness where even more violence can be unleashed. And perhaps the deeper truth is that when we refuse to extend God's love to the enemy, we find ourselves pushed in the darkness as well. The professor found himself in Joppa—at a crossroad moment—where he was challenged with just how far God's love can go.

To be truthful, with all that has been swirling around us, part of me wants to shelf this story. These days, it is nearly impossible to put our judgement or our voodoo dolls away and allow the bigness of God's love to extend even to those who threaten our personhood and livelihood. Just ask Jonah how hard it is. Just ask Peter. Just ask anyone who has been in the fight long enough to carry the bitter scars of a world as it is. Yes, we would probably like to ignore this story. But Luke already knows that, which is why he tells us the story twice.

These days we find ourselves at another crossroad moment. Where we can either lean in the best we can, sharing God's love even when we don't want to. Or we can run the other way potentially pushing others deeper into the darkness. So maybe we do a Loving Kindness meditation, or admit we need God's help to keep fighting while forgiving. There are so many complexities to consider, it is hard to know. But what we do know is that the gospel says that God's love is so big that it is everywhere and for everyone—even the unclean. And who am I to hinder God?