

“Barrier-Breaking Love”

John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 18, 2025

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be stretched open even wider by your expansive love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

We are experiencing an interesting coincidence this weekend. On Friday, my devotional message in the weekly email was about the parable of the Good Samaritan. That was not an accident, because it was the centering scripture for our Supper of Substance that night. Our conversation at the Supper was about how to be prepared to love our neighbors, especially in situations when we're confronted with the need to come to the aid of a neighbor, one we may not know, who may be different from us. Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan because in a discussion about the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, someone asked him, “But who IS my neighbor?”

The coincidence we're experiencing now is that our two scripture readings this morning basically set up and answer the same question. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another,” we read from John. And just in case we were tempted to define the meaning of “one another” as narrowly as possible, we're given this story from Acts to clarify just how wide that net is actually cast. It's not clear that someone asked the question again, but the answer bears repeating.

If you've been paying attention, you know that I love any story with a good food metaphor. The story of Peter and the Gentiles in Caesarea is one of my favorites. If I were in charge of such things, it would be the focus of a major church holiday, when Christians from all sorts of different cultures would get together for a giant picnic on the grounds, spreading out our sheets and blankets and having a big tasting party of all our various traditional foods. We could schedule it in late August, smack dab in the middle of Ordinary Time, when not much else is going liturgically. You really should read the actual story from Acts chapter 10, which was just summarized in what we read today from Acts 11, when Peter was called to account for what had happened. It's a great story. And honestly, it's a more important story for people like us than we usually acknowledge.

When I say "people like us," I'm talking about the fact that we are not ethnically Jewish. If this transition hadn't happened, when the early church opened up to Gentiles, we wouldn't be here; the Church as we know it, for better and for worse, simply wouldn't exist. The story of Peter in Caesarea isn't the only thing that made the difference, but it's one of the most dramatic turning points. It's a big deal. Even Jesus himself didn't seem entirely certain that he had come for anyone besides the Jewish people, if you look at all the places where it comes up in the gospels. But in the post-Resurrection era, it became increasingly clear that what God was doing was bigger than any one culture or people.

Again, the food metaphors can help here. The cultural norms that are challenged by this vision – keeping kosher and not eating with Gentiles who don't keep kosher – are presumably the point. But Peter's description of what he saw and artistic renderings of his vision make clear just how dramatic the possibilities were. [slide] Did first-century Jews really think Gentiles ate camels and hippopotamuses? Or vultures or elephants or crocodiles? Some of the animals in these pictures weren't even native to the area, so would they really have showed up in Peter's vision? Or is that the point? Maybe these artists are trying to show us just how world-changing God's challenge to Peter in this vision was. We might have assumed this was just about pork or shellfish, but God's love is so much bigger than we have even imagined!

And again, sometimes the problem with metaphors is that they are abstract and hard to apply to "real life." But not food metaphors! Because food is real life. Food is simultaneously something that we need every day and something that can be a challenge, just like love. And also like love, it's something that we can grow and change in relation to. We can get better at loving, just as our tastes can broaden and deepen. I love Greek food. Olives, hummus, tabbouleh, tzatziki, pita bread, spanakopita – I've even recently come to appreciate stuffed grape leaves. But in my first memory of a Greek restaurant, this enjoyment had not yet blossomed. I was a child and we went to a Greek restaurant while on vacation with another family. And I think I mostly remember it because everybody else gently made fun of me for what I

ordered: a hamburger. A normal, “American” hamburger. I wasn’t ready for those strong flavors. I apparently wasn’t in the mood to have my horizons broadened. So I asked for a hamburger, which was, in fact, an option on the menu because apparently Greek people are more hospitable than my family thought they needed to be. I’m not sure how I grew beyond that childhood moment, but I’m glad I did. And the fact that I did, the fact that most of us aren’t limited by our childhood distastes, shows us that we have the capacity to grow and change.

Peter’s story really isn’t about food; it’s about love. But food is so real, so visceral, that it helps us absorb the point of the story more convincingly. There are people out there who need God’s love who are really strong flavors. There are people out there living their lives in ways that you may have been told most of your life are not appropriate ways to live life. I don’t know if any of them are actually eating giraffes, but it might seem like it. It may make as much sense as God telling you to have a vulture sandwich for lunch, but that is the answer to the question.

We hear Jesus say “love one another,” and we may not even realize the ways in which we’re still trying to get him to narrow down the list of people included in “one another.” We still have our moments when we’re tempted to protest, like Peter, that “nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth!” But can’t you just hear Jesus saying, “Really? Do you not remember what I told you about that? It’s not what goes in your mouth that defiles it, but what comes out!”

We live in times when powerful voices are trying to heighten the divisions in our society, drawing firm boundaries between “us” and “them,” between “good Americans” and people who are “unAmerican.” They’re trying to tell us those other people are bad, that the way they live their lives is a threat to the way we live our lives, that we must protect ourselves against them. They’re even telling us that they’re eating animals we know aren’t for eating! We do not have to buy into this divisive agenda. Who are we to hinder the love of God? Who is anyone to hinder the love of God? What God has called good, no one can denigrate as less than sacred. “They” may not be like us, but God loves them just as much as God loves us. And if we can learn to love them too, our lives will be that much fuller of God’s love! I’m guessing it will be even more rewarding than learning to love Greek food!

“Love one another,” Jesus says. Every other, all others. This is how we came to be part of the family of God. We are called to keep growing this family by sharing God’s love across all barriers and division. Hallelujah and Amen.