

Expanding the Way
Seventh in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

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Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

⁴Then 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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If 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?”

¹⁸When 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.”

At the heart of this scripture is a line that we so desperately need to hear following this difficult and tension-filled week. In trying to address a diverse people, who were deeply divided and bring them together in Christ, Peter said: *The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.* The situation here about the expansion of the church in the Acts of the Apostles does not translate directly to our country's election season, but – as I understand the text – there is a helpful word for how we can navigate these fraught days as people of faith.

Let me begin with the biblical context. A bit earlier in the Acts of the Apostles, just before the conversion of Paul in the ninth chapter, the writer Luke calls the growing community of the faithful, “people who belonged to the Way.” It is the earliest description of Christian identity, People of the Way, a name which indicates the people of God are on a journey as the gospel expands its presence in the world. There is a sense in which the evidence of our faith and certainly of our faithfulness is always in motion. People of the Way enact what we believe. We live out our calling.

Rachel Baard is a Reformed Theologian from South Africa, for fifteen years on the faculty of Villanova University before she was called to Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond. Baard was recently interviewed about how theology and ethics intersect with this season of the pandemic, of anxious turmoil and of political division in our country. She said: “This has all been very sad and the need for social distancing has, of course, challenged everyone – including people of faith – but the deeper challenge lies in re-thinking the question: What does it mean to *be* the church, and not just *go* to church? She answers that question: “I think the role of the church has always been the same... To be a community with God's values in the world. When we are not confronted and not challenged by the world we fall back into our comfort zone. But if we say we are rooted in God's grace, we live by the ethic of what God wants for us.” And then she drives her point home saying: Christian theology is decidedly political, not in the sense of party

politics. Religion mixed with party politics can get distorted on both sides of the aisle. But in the sense of offering a different value system, a new way of being in the world, overturning hierarchies and insisting on full human rights for all.”¹ For everybody, everywhere.

This “new way of being in the world,” of carrying with us God’s value system is precisely how The Acts of the Apostles unfolds. As we have seen over these past several weeks, there has been one conversion after another, but the truth is that Acts is about the conversion of a whole people – People of the Way who become the church in and for the world. Acts has shown us that – even in this pandemic while we are still unable to be together, we can still be the church in our homes, in our communities, in our commitments, in our political process even. Being the church requires that we carry God’s values with us to build up community for the common good, and not to sew further division and rancor.

The text before us is admittedly a very strange story as biblical visions often are. But this story was so important to the early church that it is actually told twice – first in chapter 10, and then it is retold in chapter 11. Because the Holy Spirit has a way of falling on strangers and outsiders, Peter is testifying to the power of God to tear down walls that divide people. The issue at hand is table fellowship – which had long identified and defined the family of God. No issue was more important to the early church than whether their newfound faith in Christ was intended only for Jewish Christians, or whether it was to include the Gentiles. The dietary distinctions of Ancient Israel may seem strange to us, but for them it was such laws and customs that had held the Jewish people together against all odds and all kinds of oppression. In his commentary on Acts, Will Willimon says, “The dietary laws demarcated faithfulness in the midst of incredible pressure to forsake the faith.” For the Jews “a little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar

¹ Rachel Baard, “Theology, Ethics and the Pandemic,” *Sharon and Brook Magazine*, Fall 2020, Union Presbyterian Seminary.

there, and it will not be long before the faith community will be politely obliterated.”²

For centuries the Jewish people had protected their way of life by excluding outsiders, especially the pagan Gentiles, who were considered unclean, and uneducated in the faith. They simply did not know what to do when Peter began preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles, and when moved by the stories of Jesus they became converts. They lodged their fervent complaint against Peter, “Why did you go to these complete outsiders, eat with them, baptize them, make Christians out of them?” “I was praying, and I had a vision,” Peter said. A large sheet came down from heaven, and I looked and saw that it contained – all the food forbidden for faithful Jews. And a voice from heaven said: What God has made cannot be called unclean. When Peter finished proclaiming his vision, his critics were convinced that God had given – even the outsider and stranger – the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. They finally understood: there is no distinction between us.

Everywhere we look today there is distinction between us; there is deep division, clearly drawn lines of demarcation distinguishing one type of person from another. The electoral maps we’ve all had our eyes fixated on this week are clearly drawn. East and West coasts against the middle; North vs South; cities and suburbs against rural places of every description. There is political division in our families which is often excruciatingly painful, and, even though we claim to share a common value system, there is division in this church.

Ezra Klein’s, *Why We Are Polarized*, is a helpful book in understanding where we are as a nation and how we came to be so divided. He suggests that once we choose teams, we may not need a reason to hate the other team. The other team doesn’t have to actually do anything; we just don’t like them because they are not us, and we have become experts at demonizing the other team. According to Klein,

² William Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation Commentary*, p. 96

American politics has become “a toxic system” which he describes like this: “The human mind is exquisitely tuned to group affiliation and group difference. It takes almost nothing for us to form a group identity, and once that happens, we naturally assume ourselves in competition with other groups. The deeper our commitment to our group becomes, the more determined we become to make sure our group wins.” There was a time when our various group affiliations were more fluid and mixed, but that time is long past, Klein argues. Marketing, media, technology, and the more sharply defined nature of political parties today reinforce group identification and the desire to maximize our group’s advantage – even if those outcomes are overall worse for everyone.”

Klein argues our polarization is caused less by differences between people and their individuality, and more by political systems of disenfranchisement that have percolated over long years. He cautions us – and I think this is important for church folks to remember – he cautions us not simply to lament all this conflict and division and wish everyone could just get along. The end of polarization is not consensus; Rather it will be founded upon changes that are less obstructive and less destructive to the other.³

So that’s our entrée as Christians into the public square to which we are indeed called as the early church in Acts – where they broke down walls of division; where the outsider and foreigner were welcomed in; where the hungry were fed; the poor had good news brought to them in word and deed; the widow had church friends make clothes for her, and everyone, everyone was welcome at the table.

Friends, in this moment, and in every election of our lives, we are asked to take these, our Christian values, into the world. We may never agree how best to use them for the common good. In the political arena, we will choose sides, align ourselves, and name our distinctions –

³ Ezra Klein, *Why We Are Polarized*, p. 44; and review in *The Christian Century*, May 20, 2020.

as liberal or conservative, for this and against that. But according to the Bible, through Christ there are no insiders *or* outsiders. Those whom God has created, we dare not profane – which means we dare not treat with abuse or contempt.

You know, sometimes those of us who have been on the inside of the church for a long time can forget that we were once the outsider. We were the Gentiles – who by God’s grace – came to be invited in. If we continue to remember that, then we can be transformed to do what Peter did, and live out our faith with our Christian values mindful that God shows no partiality. ¹²*The Spirit told me to go with them, Peter said, and not to make a distinction between them and us.*

AMEN.