



The Secular IS the Sacred – TouchPoint for May 15, 2019

Acts 11:1-18 [NRSV] Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "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. As I looked at it closely I saw four-

footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 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. 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; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.' 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?"

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."

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

"What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ... "The Spirit told me to go with them and not make a distinction between them and us."

Here's what makes us distinct, that we make no distinction. It is a hard word. In this world where the tribal mentality seems to be winning; where distinction, separation, and de-humanizing seem to be on the rise; it is a word that shatters our constructs and collapses our systems. I would like to say that we in the church are much better than that. I would like to say that I am much better than that, but reality paints a different picture.

Now, I will admit, that some in the Christian church are somewhat ready to welcome all into our midst and have them join us at our table, I count myself amongst those people, but that is not what is happening in this passage. Peter is not inviting them to join him at HIS table, he is joining them at THEIR table!

Look, I count myself amongst those willing to welcome all into my table and community, but what about joining them at their table and community? What about them NOT joining us—but US JOINING THEM? Don't we all respond like Peter? God forbid, nothing unclean can associate with me. They can only be purified when they join us—after they become like us. And the voice from heaven cries out, *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."*

I have a friend who is very active with the Lutheran University he attended. He shared with me a sad story of a fellow alumnus who said he couldn't support the school anymore because it was becoming too secular, it wasn't Christian anymore. But how does that statement fit with this Bible passage: *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."* What this passage is saying is that there is no sacred and profane. There is no secular and sacred. When God creates anything God says *"It is good."* Or to use the phrase in today's passage, *"It is clean."* And aren't we all created by God? If the incarnation teaches us anything, it is that all ground is sacred and holy ground. And all flesh is worthy of bearing the Christ.

I just find it fascinating that the way we worship Jesus, who spent his whole life attacking the tribal mentality, who lived almost his whole life in Gentile country, who healed and forgave Gentile people—including Roman soldiers and family members, along with devout and sincere Jews and probably some less than devout and sincere Jews—I just find it

fascinating that the way we worship the one whose main purpose in life was to tear down the tribal mentality of the world and declare God's love for all—I just find it fascinating that the way we worship this one is by creating a tribe called “Christians” who spend all their time trying to figure out who is in and who is out, who belongs and who doesn't, who is holy and who is impure, and who is going to Heaven and who is going to Hell. Go figure! SERIOUSLY?! That's what you get out of the life and teachings of this guy?!

It goes back to what we have talked about before. What is the essence of the Divine? Is it unity? Oneness? Or purity and the separation of good and bad? It's pretty clear from this passage what it is—painfully clear. It's pretty clear from the judgment parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus spoke of. The ones who are “saved” are not those who have Christ, the sheep do not have Christ, NO, the ones who are “saved” are the ones who meet the Christ in the other. And sometimes they don't even recognize the Christ before they meet him there. *“When did we see you hungry and feed you?”* The sheep ask. And they not only meet the Christ in the other, but enter into the world of the other.

“I was hungry and you fed ME.” “I was thirsty and you gave ME drink.” “I was in prison and you visited ME.” We don't just invite others into our Christian community, we encounter the Christ in others and in their community. Look, **we follow** the one who touched all communities and tribes, but could not be contained by any. **We follow him.** **We do not possess him.** We do not own him. We witness to him by meeting people where they are at and loving them. This is what seems to most irritate the other disciples about what Peter did. It wasn't that he didn't invite those others to join us and become a part of us—they and we would have been good with that. No, what Peter did was join them, eat with them at their place, at their table with their food. Unclean, unholy, unsanctified food. And that was unacceptable to them and to us.

And the voice from heaven cries out, *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”* I think the voice is talking about more than food here. I think it's talking about people as well. *“Do not make a distinction between them and us.”* Paul tries to get at this when he says, *“I have become all things to all people.”* And he does that because he is convinced that because of Christ, *“There is no Gentile or Jew, slave or free, male or female.”* He is convinced that because of Christ, *“... the Father is the one from whom all families get their names.”* And that because of Christ, all are one, because *“Christ is all and in all.”*

We do Christ no favors when we set up a tribe in the name of the one whose purpose was to break down the tribe mentality and declare God's love and forgiveness for all unless of course, we understand that Christ's tribe **includes all.** *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” ... “The Spirit told me to go with them and not make a distinction between them and us.”* Here's what makes us distinct—that we make no distinction. As Paul writes, *“For there is no distinction between Jew or Gentile”* and in our present day, perhaps we should add, Muslim or Christian, Hindu or Buddhist *“for the same Lord is Lord over all.”* Shouldn't we emphasize the word “ALL” here as much as the word “Lord”?

And again Paul writes, *“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace **AS A GIFT.**”* I'm sorry, explain to me this distinction you would like to make. Who is secular and who is sacred? Who is profane and who is clean? “Ahhh”, we protest, “but those people, they deny Jesus! Jesus would never invite those who deny him to supper or go eat with them even if it was THE LAST SUPPER he ever ate! —right?” Apparently not! I wonder why it is Peter gets this better than most. I'll have to do some research on that and get back to you.

But here is what I find even more fascinating than Peter going and eating with them. What I find more fascinating than what Peter did is what happened when he did. The Holy Spirit appeared! The Christ was present. *“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them.”* Not after I spoke. Not after they heard. Not after they believed or decided. *“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them.”* Salvation, which means ‘healing’ and ‘wholeness’ breaks out! In the beginning! Unity happens!!! Profane people eating profane food. We with them and them with us and salvation, healing, and wholeness breaks out. Certainly that means something doesn't it?

I remember having a conversation recently with a pastor friend of mine about Holy Communion. He said there was ongoing discussion in his denomination about who can preside over communion. Does it need to be an ordained person to make it valid? Can only 'called and ordained' people lead the Eucharist? This seemed to be the side of the church leaders. That wasn't really the side he was on and he shared a quote with me he had read or heard somewhere and I think it applies. The quote goes something like this,

"There is one thing and one thing only that makes Holy Communion valid, and that is that there is someone there who doesn't deserve to be there, who is inappropriate to be there..."

AND SOMETIMES THAT PERSON IS YOU!"

So let me invite you to this table where a Holy Communion takes place and I'll make it valid for you and you can make it valid for me, and then let's go from here and not make a distinction between them and us.

Amen.