

A Mark of Distinction
John 13.31-35; Acts
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A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church
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There I stood in the great Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, front and center before the chancel, directly under the highest point of the vaulted ceiling of that magnificent sanctuary. The icons were all poised and statuesque. The stained glass reflected a glorious light spilling down from towering heights. The grand pulpit was to my right. The lectern to my left was adorned with the heaven-descended dove heralding the message of the Word. The choir filled the perimeter of the expansive chancel in front of me, singing beautifully a Taize refrain.

This was years ago, when my wife Julie and I were in Paris on our anniversary. Previously, Julie had lived for a year in Paris. While there, she became a member of the choir at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. And in those particular moments she was actually reunited with old choir friends and singing up there with the heavenly hosts of choristers. Meanwhile, I had made my way forward during the service. I came from far back in the cathedral to the chancel communion rail, along with the masses – who had come from all over – I moved along with the hundreds who were there for the mass.

All of the service was spoken and sung in French. So I could not fully understand the words, but when the host was broken and blessed, I knew and I could see. I came forward knowing that was the time and the expression for the invitation – to come forward and to partake, to receive – what else could it be? Except that I knew that the Roman Church is yet to acknowledge those from other communions in the Christian family, much less others beyond. Hence, the welcome to the sacrament is not extended to others beyond the Roman communion as a matter of practice.

So by the time I was moved, literally to that center point in the great sanctuary, in the midst of the masses, hearing the words of a language that I could not fully understand, and the chorus of glorious music . . . There I stood before a resolute, gracious young priest, whose hand held the host, reaching out to me, and whose words I surely knew to be “the body of Christ for you” . . . I wasn’t about to say anything but “Amen.”

In the passage before us this Lord’s Day, from the Acts of the Apostles – a traditional text in the Season of Easter, we find certain acts of the Apostle Peter. Just as Paul has had a dramatic conversion, noted in an earlier passage in Acts, here we find Peter, through a dream having a conversion: a change in which he comes to see those who were different – those who were regarded to be unclean, the Gentiles and more – Instead of rejecting and excluding them, they are seen to be accepted, welcomed, included.

This 11th chapter of Acts, is actually the second of 2 distinct chapters about reach and outreach to the Gentiles, to those beyond the favorite and the familiar. Peter is the one reaching out to those groups in the regions beyond Jerusalem. The 11th chapter begins

with Peter, having come back from the outer regions, to the apostles in Jerusalem, only to be confronted and criticized by them. They rail at him for meeting with the uncircumcised, those who were beyond the pail of the Jewish practice of the law. They are especially appalled at his obvious violation of dietary laws. (And how ironic is all this: I mean here we have New Christians decrying another new Christian for doing just what Jesus did . . . and for what Jesus got attacked for doing by the religious people! Strange things happen in the name of religion.)

I am reminded of certain modern, literary words of refusal to eat certain foods, namely . . . Green Eggs and Ham: "I will not eat them in a boat, I will not eat them with a goat, I will not eat them here or there, I will not eat them anywhere...I do not like them, Sam-I-Am."

So it is with Dr. Suess' comical poem about a refusal to eat an unfamiliar dish. Peter, in essence has this dream, with a vision for him that was disturbing: an array of unclean animals. His aversion to the animals in the dream goes way beyond the "yuck" factor. The unclean animals would have also included shrimp, pigs, and rabbits, foods that most people around the world find quite tasty. The sheet full of creatures – that descends from on high in his dream -- was an affront to Peter's piety, not his taste buds, for it was God who had told the people of Israel to make a distinction between "clean" and "unclean" animals. The distinctions were spelled out for them quite clearly in Leviticus (11:2-28) and Deuteronomy (14:3-20). Making these distinctions was what had held them together as a people through the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, and all the pressures under the Roman occupation to assimilate to the pagan world. But Peter comes to see, the mark of distinction is not exclusion, but inclusion. "God shows no partiality."

We live in a world of distinctions. Some of them seem sensible and helpful: people with good grades get into good schools. People who work hard deserve to get promoted faster than the slackers, and so forth. But some distinctions we make are more harmful than helpful, and not at all reasonable.

While we might not use the categories "clean" and "unclean" to describe people on either side of the boundaries we set, our society also has its implicit purity codes, its own ideas about who is "in" or "out," or more deserving or less deserving. Depending on your orientation, the "unclean" might be illegal immigrants, gays and lesbians, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans...Some of the mightiest and most painful struggles in our history have been over distinctions we make among people. In the civil rights era, a black person sitting down at a lunch counter was seen as a provocation, an unacceptable, even illegal crossing of a boundary.

But God, we know, makes no distinctions. "God shows no partiality." That became a central affirmation of the early Christian movement. "There is no distinction," Paul said, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All have sinned, and all have access to the overwhelming grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The church of Jesus Christ is where the old boundaries are broken, and if you insist on maintaining them at all cost, in Peter's words, you could be "hindering God."

Unlike the priest that day at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, the people of the church I served in downtown Washington years ago most definitely knew I was Presbyterian. It was congregation which attracted many college students and international folks and homeless folks. There was one particular communion service whereupon an invitation to the sacrament, I invited “all who have been baptized” to come forward, as per the church’s teaching on the sacrament. After the service, a couple folks were waiting for me, Yoshi – a student from Japan who had grown up Buddhist, and George a graduate student from South Africa. Each were hoping – in their own way – that I wasn’t offended, as they had not been baptized . . . yet they had come, they had heard the Word and welcome . . . to communion, they could not remain seated.

It caused me to think about is all: How could we spend so much time talking about how Christ is present with this bread and this cup without recognizing that this table is for everyone? I realized I am questioning church order. And maybe I’m even into heresy. But I believe that Christ’s presence and invitation at the table, his love, is so great that we cannot go to this communion table ourselves without inviting all our neighbors to come with us as well.

Like Peter, I might add: “Who am I to hinder God?”

What are we to do when the Holy Spirit moves in startling and unexpected ways, challenging the boundaries we thought were fixed, "making no distinction" and offending our sense of propriety? Sometimes all we can do is give thanks for the Spirit’s movement and not do anything to get in its way.

We come to the Table as recipients of the boundless mercy of God, who has defied expectations and opened the borders to us. All we can do is come in gratitude, bringing nothing of our own, but trusting in Jesus Christ to receive us and welcome us, feed us and sustain us, now and always.

Amen