

Title: Reformed, and Always Being Reformed
Text: Acts 11:1 - 18
Date: May 19, 2019

I think most of us fail to appreciate how wild and crazy this story is that is being related to us this morning. Peter is up on the roof praying when he has this vision of a large sheet descending from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals and reptiles and birds in it.

Now you typically see me doing "First Pew" week after week, but you fail to see the ideas that have been discarded along the way as I strive to come up with something where both children and adults might come away with just a tiny new insight. One of those discarded ideas involved a picnic blanket spread out on the floor here for the kids, with an array of unclean food on it – like durian, or fried rats. As I invite the kids to the picnic, a disembodied voice comes over the sound system and says, "**Take, and eat. Don't call anything unclean that God has made clean.**" That's an example of a children's sermon that didn't make the final cut.

Well perhaps there is some value to this children's sermon, because it is that same gut level revulsion that the Jews had when thinking of food that was unclean according to Levitical standards. Of course, from a Jewish perspective, just as the idea of eating unclean food was repugnant, so was the idea of eating with Gentiles. So then these early Jewish followers of Christ were shocked, and criticized Peter saying, "**Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them!?"** (11:3) This wasn't idle curiosity. This was disgust.

The fact of the matter was that Peter had changed. The vision he received led him to new understanding, and the new understanding led to a new way of relating to others.

I think we fail to appreciate the extent to which this was messin' with people's minds. These were earnest, devout followers of Jesus. As a "people of the book" it was their nature to turn back to scripture, so you can just imagine the debate they would have been having. Peter, you want to have a BLT for lunch? The scriptures clearly state that bacon is unclean. (Leviticus 11: 7) Peter, you're now eating shrimp salad sandwiches? Don't you know that Leviticus 11:9 -12 clearly states that that is an abomination. These were good ol' Bible believin' Christians, and Peter had them in a conniption.

And I think we fail to appreciate how fascinating Peter's reply is. He *doesn't* respond with dueling scriptures. Chapter 11 is an explanation of his actions. He recounts *the vision* of the sheet being lowered with the unclean animals. He explains how at the same time three men from Caesarea had *a simultaneous vision* in which they were told to go and get Peter, and that "**he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.**" (11:14)

Are you wondering what that message might have been? The fact is that we are told that Peter had barely begun to speak when "**the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.**" (11:15) He then offered this further explanation when he said, "**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?"** (11:16 – 17)

If that account is not captivating enough already, the response of these early Jewish Christians is equally fascinating. We might have expected them to come back with more quotes about the purity laws, or with more quotes about how they are to be a people set apart. Instead, what did they say? We read that **“When they heard this, they were silenced,”** recognizing that this gift of Life was being offered to the Gentiles as well. Whatever arguments they thought that they had, it was this powerful movement of the Spirit that brought everything into perspective, and ended the debate.

To be clear, this is not to cast Peter in the light of being a great reformer. We have to remember that the vision *came* to him. He was called by *others* to come, heal, preach, and baptize. God was speaking *through* him. Who was he to resist God? (11:17)

This story was so important to the early church that while it was told in chapter 10, it was re-told almost word for word in chapter 11. Stories, not arguments, change lives. We are told this story again so that we might know exactly what changed the hearts and minds of the Jerusalem leaders. The story was not seen as Peter trying to change the rules. He was not trying to create a disturbance. God had intervened in his life calling him to overcome his stereotypes and distinctions and see his mission in more universal terms.

This has a lot of relevance to the church today. Thinking of the history of Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church, there was a day when slavery was accepted here as “that’s just the way it is.” The Spirit intervened, and that practice is now considered abhorrent. There was a day when same-sex relationships were considered an abomination. The Spirit has been at work over the last couple of decades, and now the LGBTQ community is not just tolerated, but celebrated. Beyond giving this community a wink, we now have highly gifted people from this community in leadership.

This is also an important reminder of the power of the Holy Spirit to shake up those of us who find comfort in reciting and parsing rules. In fact, we observe modern-day Pharisees when people who have never had their own experience with the transforming power of the Holy Spirit are using the Scriptures as a tool for debating their own interests.

In terms of understanding our own Presbyterian faith tradition better, there is a phrase that many of you are familiar with. We describe the church as “reformed, and always reforming.” The original motto in Latin was *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, and was a rallying cry for Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians dating all the way back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Just as our text today is an account of the early church being reformed at its very outset, the belief is that the Spirit is *always* at work reforming the church.

This is an important truth to claim as we seek to follow the wind of the Spirit into the uncharted waters of the age in which we live. As strongly as I believe that, there are also ways in which we need to be on guard against misuse of that same idea. The phrase has sometimes been used almost as a weapon against those who differ from us, as if to say, “My position is more reformed than your position!”

It would be helpful to get a grip on what the Reformers meant. Rightly understood, it really challenges both the conservative *and* the liberal impulses that characterize our diverse church today. It does not bless either preservation for preservation's sake, *or* change for change's sake.

First, we should be clear on what the motto does not mean:

1. *Newer is always better.*

Using the motto to back up any and all "innovations" would be a misuse of the original intent. In many places where the slogan appears, the phrase is completed with a clarifying addition so that it reads: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbi dei*, which translates, "reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God."

2. *The church can reform itself.*

We can be misled to believe that the church is the agent of its own reformation. God is the agent of reformation. The church is rather the object of God's reforming work. The Latin verb is passive, and it is probably better translated as "always being reformed" or "always to be reformed."

The Presbyterian *Book of Order* actually says: "**The church, in obedience to Jesus Christ, is open to the reform of its standards of doctrine as well as of governance. The church affirms 'Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,' that is, 'the church reformed, always reforming,' according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.**"

Second, we should be clear on why the church needs reforming

1. *Because of who we are.*

Part of our openness to being reformed comes out of a conviction about who we are. Reformed folk have been particularly aware of human fallibility.

This is why Reformed confessions tend to have their own built-in disclaimers. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* actually asserts, "**Councils may err and many have erred.**"

The church is a frail and fallible pilgrim people, a people on the way, not yet what we shall be. The church, because of who we are, is called to remain open to always being reformed.

2. *Because of who God is - a living God*

Openness to being reformed comes not only because of who we are but because of who God is. God is not bound, either to our tradition or to our particular contemporary context. God's revelation is always a gift, never a given.

The Presbyterian *Confession of 1967* underscores this teaching: "**As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.**"

There is so much more that could be said about this, but it is critical to remember that the same God who we describe as being "the same yesterday, today, and forever," has also been and will be an agent of change yesterday, today, and forever. As a people who worship and serve a living God, we always need to be open to being "re-formed."

This is a time to reflect on this as you prepare to call a new pastor. How is God currently re-forming Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church? Are you being called to new forms of leadership, as opposed to everything revolving around a single individual? Are you being called to a new era of challenging the prevailing culture, as opposed to mirroring the prevailing culture? Are you being called to find your prophetic voice, and be led by the Spirit to speak truth to power? Are you being called to go even deeper with regards to “choosing welcome”?

May your hearts resonate with Peter’s heart in concluding that you never want to be remembered as the one who hindered God. May your hearts remain soft – even humble – in the hands of a living God.

Amen.

Acts 11:1 – 18 (NRSV)

1 Now the apostles and the believers 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 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."**