

## Acts 11:1-18

I don't know if you've read the *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins, whether you're into them, or whether you believe they are horrible, but I have enjoyed the majority of the books. The latest release of the series, *Sunrise on the Reaping*, is set in an enclosed arena that has been created by the game-makers to completely confuse the teenagers who are forced to fight one another for their lives, there is only one remaining victor. In this arena everything that in the normal world is good has been turned into evil. The permeating flower aroma is not only enticing, it seems to have the effect of a sedative on those who breathe in too deeply. The clear bubbling water of the streams is poisoned. Beautiful butterflies act as tazers. The pollen, if one should happen to be enticed into the flowerbeds, induces seizures. Everything that looks beautiful and wholesome is created to do harm. What a terrifying experience to the characters who were forced into the arena.

Just as the teens in the arena knew they could not eat the fruit or smell the flowers, Peter had been raised not to eat unclean food. Clean animals were any that had divided and cleft-hooves and also chewed cud, such as an ox, deer, sheep, goat or gazelle. An example of an unclean would be a camel or rabbit. Any sea creature that has scales could be eaten, however those without are unclean. Most fish were considered clean but mollusks, dolphin, whale, shark are examples of those that were considered unclean, therefore prohibited food. Most birds, especially birds of prey were forbidden food, however chicken, pheasant and dove are examples of those allowed. Not that they sound enticing, but a few insects were considered clean, but most were unclean.

Peter is explaining to a group of believers who think that the gentile converts to following Christ, or The Way, should adopt the customs of the Jewish law. They were aghast that Peter ate with "unclean" Gentiles, that is, those who did not follow the Jewish laws. Peter recalls his vision to them, how the sheet was lowered with unclean animals and the voice of God told him to eat. Twice he refused, saying he never ate an unclean animal. The third time the voice ordered him to eat saying that God has now made these clean and they can be eaten. Then the sheet was raised. Three times is a very important number in the Bible, if anything is repeated three times, or has 3 as it's base, remember it, because it is important.

After this vision declaring what God has made clean should not be treated as unclean, visitors who were Gentile came to Peter and asked him to accompany them. The Holy Spirit caused Peter to recall and understand his vision, he was to go with these men, they would not defile him. After hearing this incredible story of how what was once not considered safe had been made safe, the men questioning Peter understood and accepted why he was with those who were not ceremonially clean. Peter was awakened to God's love for everyone; Peter, who was often a thorn in the side of Paul's efforts to reach the Gentiles, the man who denied Jesus when arrest or punishment was threatened for acknowledging the Lord. Christian beliefs can certainly move us away from believing that those who are unlike us are evil.

Yet despite all Peter's flaws and checkered past, God overlooked those things and still used him for an important task! Just like he will use us, despite all the missteps in our lives. Our John Wesley saw this text as proof that the church cannot exclude anyone. That is part of the wonderful goodness of God.

You see, God is not just good, God is goodness itself. Goodness is all about love and compassion. To be on the receiving end of such wonderful love cannot help but change you and make you want to be different.

Martin Luther claimed that those who know God is love are happy. There is modern proof to this centuries old claim. Neurobiological research indicates that belief in a loving God impacts the brain in such a way that it results in a positive sense of self and behavior leading to health and happiness. To know that God loves us is so wonderful that we cannot help but change and want to be different.

We are here to worship God who invites us to come just as we are. We have come seeking God, longing to experience God's presence, to hear God's word and be fed the Bread of Life. We have come needing renewal and restoration, weary and worn. God gives us living water and grants us peace. We come as we are and we are changed by God's love and grace.

But can we actually be changed? Some people think not, however, the Bible account of Saul is an amazing story of how a person who encounters Jesus can change. Saul prosecuted Christians; he was zealous in his God-given duty. On the road to bring some Christians back he was thrown from his donkey and was unconscious. In this unconscious state he stood before Jesus who asked him why he persecuted the people who followed Jesus. Saul's entire attitude was changed, as was his name. Jesus renamed him as Paul, and he went on to be one of the most dedicated disciples of Jesus the Bible recorded. His attitude toward those who were different was changed by his encounter with Jesus.

Where do we encounter the life changing Jesus? There is little chance that we would be thrown off a donkey, although sometimes life threatening events do bring us closer to Jesus. I know a woman who lives in Florida told me she was in the hospital and near death. She wasn't a believer. Sure she knew about God, was taught about the Bible as a child, but didn't truly believe in everything she had ever been told. She changed her mind and truly began to follow Jesus after his appearance at her bedside where he told her how much she was loved and that she needed to recover and be his disciple. Was it a fever induced hallucination? She didn't think so as she recovered and became a follower of Jesus who brought many to Christ.

How do we encounter Jesus? It is highly unlikely that we will have a vision of him as we lay ill in a hospital bed. To encounter Jesus, we intentionally need to look for him in every face we see, in all the people we come across. We need to treat others as Jesus would treat them.

I want you to ask yourself, what would be in the blanket God dropped in front of us? What do we believe to be unacceptable that God considers good?

There is wonderful goodness in God. We are on the receiving end of that goodness, goodness that changes us, gives us joy, gives us like Peter, the courage to change, to reach out to others who are not like us, and to bring some of God's goodness to others. All glory be to God.