

## An Unexpected Change of Menu (Acts 11:1-18)

Today, I'm going to ask you all to use your imaginations. Imagine a big celebration you've had in the past with those you love all around you—maybe a graduation, a wedding, a Thanksgiving or Christmas. Do you have the scene set in your mind? Is it clear whose faces are around the table? Friends? Family? Now—quick—what are you eating? You probably don't have to think about that one for long. Our celebrations often revolve around food, and our recollections of those events often contain many memories of flavors and smells as they do of conversations and relationships.

Now imagine that someone changed the menu. You arrived at the next celebration expecting the traditional fare: turkey and dressing, or wedding cake, or your favorite lasagna or apple pie—*SURPRISE!* You ended up with something completely different on your plate. Would you be startled? Disappointed? Upset?

This happened to me when I was teaching at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee. One weekend several teachers were invited to visit the mother of our English

department chair in Chicago. When I was asked what I wanted to drink, I said, “Soda.” To me that means a white, sweet soda, like 7-Up or Sprite. To my surprise, I received a Club Soda—which is not sweet. Needless to say, it lasted the entire evening.

Peter’s attention to detail of menu went far beyond tradition and expectation. For him it was a matter of faithfulness to God and to God’s commands. To eat the things lowered on the sheet in his dream would mean more than a change of menu. In his understanding, it was just as much of a sin as lying or adultery or murder. So, for Peter to come to terms with these menu changes, enough to tell believers of Judea that the items on the sheet are clean and acceptable to eat, is life-changing. But he has been told by a voice from heaven: “What God has made clean; you must not call profane.”

Just as astounding as Peter’s announcement of what is OK to eat is his announcement of whom to expect around the table. For us, “You are what you eat” is a mantra we all know, but those in Peter’s day would have found it even more important to say, “You are whom you

eat with.” Jews did not eat with Gentiles, did not accept their hospitality, and believed to do so would mean they would become culturally and spiritually polluted. Now the menu has changed, and so have the table companions, and this radical change is causing quite a stir among the followers of Christ who were first Jewish.

The lesson for Peter is that the distinction between clean and unclean no longer applies to food or people. This is what Jesus implies when he taught that it is not what enters a man from the outside that makes him unclean, but what comes from within (Mark 7:17-23).

There are **three** surprisingly filling moments in this story. **First**, Peter receives orders to fill himself with all kinds of foods he has previously thought off limits. **Second**, he receives an equally surprising order to fulfill an invitation to the house of non-Jews. **Third**, suddenly his new Gentile friends are filled with the Spirit of God.

News travels quickly. The news of the Holy Spirit’s coming on the Gentiles reaches Jerusalem before Peter does. The church there is horrified by reports of Peter mixing with Gentiles (v. 3). Peter vividly describes what

happened, especially the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household (v. 15), noting that he had six witnesses who can testify to the fact (v. 12).

Earlier in Acts, Peter asked the Sanhedrin to judge if it is right to obey them or to obey God (4:19). Here, as Peter tells his Christian Jewish brothers in Jerusalem about the events at Cornelius' house, he applies the same principle. Peter wasn't about to oppose God by denying water baptism to those whom God had baptized in the Spirit (v. 17).

The main point of this Scripture reading is to illustrate the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian faith and the growth of the church in Antioch. It details Peter's account of his vision and ministry to Cornelius, emphasizing that God's grace extends to all nations, not just the Jewish people.

All objections are dropped (v. 18), and the Jerusalem church praises God that he has given the gift of repentance that leads to eternal life (salvation) to non-Jews.

This is an important turning point in the church's life. Luke indicates its importance by reporting it three times (Acts 10; 11; 15:1-11).

Luke again shows us people "warts and all." Tanning was considered an unclean activity, and although Luke tells us Peter was staying at Simon the tanner's house. Peter makes no mention of this in his report to his Jewish brothers (v. 5). We don't know why he didn't mention it, but we know that to accept hospitality from an unclean Jew was unthinkable. It required a vision from God to change his thinking (10:9-20).

It's the movement of the Holy Spirit into the new Gentile believers that finally convinces Peter's critics, those who believed you had to follow Jewish law to follow Jesus. After all, if entering these believers' hearts is good enough for the Holy Spirit, who are they to say that they are unclean or unworthy?

The shocking truth they have to accept is this: Gentiles are on God's menu of acceptable converts. In fact,

everyone is on God's menu as a person fit for his love and grace. As we look around us, we should ask: who out there have we assumed is off God's menu?

God's purpose is that not only Jews but also non-Jews should hear the gospel and be saved. Peter needed to learn that old distinctions about what, or with whom to eat, no longer apply.

Huge theological, cultural, and paradigm shifts are never easy. If the change that God is calling for is an attack on human pride and arrogance, some people will never change. This was the case for many early Christians. Still there is nothing strange about turmoil going on in everyone's lives, because when we are weak, the grace of God makes us strong, more dependent on him, and not the world. One of the major parts of living the Christian life is having the Lord constantly changing our views, theologies, sinful feelings, or cultural-givens because he is changing us from one degree of glory to another.

What shifts, whether cultural or theological, are you called to go through in your life?

What are the **lessons** we can learn from this Scripture reading in Luke?

This reading from Luke teaches us about God's inclusive nature and love highlighting how God's grace extends to all people including Gentiles, regardless of their background or cultural traditions. Peter's experience with Cornelius and the vision he received challenges our preconceived notions and our need to re-evaluate long-held beliefs and prejudices about who is included in God's plan. The Holy Spirit's presence and work among Gentiles, particularly the gift of repentance and salvation demonstrate God's power to transform hearts and lead people to faith, ultimately leading us to a greater understanding of his grace and love for all people.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Lord God, grant us the courage to share the good news of Jesus to all who will listen, just as Peter did in our Scripture reading. Help us to overcome any fear or hesitation in sharing our faith, and to trust that your Spirit will empower us to speak boldly. Father, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, just as you did upon Peter and Cornelius. May your Spirit guide our words, empower our hearts, and lead us to share your message effectively. We pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to reveal your truth and move hearts to respond to your call. Lord, grant repentance to those who do not know you, and awaken their hearts to your love. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior, and Lord. **Amen.**