

Meaty Dreams

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Acts 11:1-18

May 5, 2013

I invite you to take a moment—close your eyes if you're comfortable with that—and ponder what would be the most difficult thing that God could ask you to do. I don't mean the most physically demanding thing, but the most morally demanding. What could God call you to do that goes against your most strongly held principles? What could God require that would utterly shock you?...

So, I picture God appearing to Greg Yost in a dream and saying, "Greg, I want you to drive a Mercedes-Benz G-Class G63 AMG"—which, I learned today from the Internet, is a luxury SUV that costs \$134,000 and gets 12 miles to the gallon. Or maybe God will decide to speak to Chris Berg in a vision: "Chris, it's time to put away your Sacred Harp hymnal and audition for the U.S. Army Chorus." Perhaps God will speak to Susan Presson: "Susan, you simply must eat more Hamburger Helper, Cheez Whiz, and Twinkies."

OK, not likely. Because we know these are all bad things, and that God is on *our* side when it comes to living simply to preserve our planet, and being all about peace, and wanting us to eat well for the sake of our health and the earth. Right? Well, maybe...

So, let's take a moment to think about our friend Peter. Came from a good Jewish family. Learned early the difference between right and wrong. He was sometimes a little slow and confused, and had a few moral lapses—those three denials on the night that Jesus was arrested lead the list—but he strove with all his energy and conviction to do the right thing and be an upstanding man of faith.

His Jewish upbringing taught him that sheep and swine were unclean, that snakes and eagles were off the list of acceptable delicacies to eat. But here they all were, gathered up in a sheet, descending from the sky. And a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." Not just once, but three times.

Peter could not have been more shocked. "Why, I never...Nothing profane like these dirty beasts has ever entered my mouth."

The voice spoke again clearly: "What God has made clean you must not call profane."

The tendency to judge is so natural, the dividing of the world into "us and them" so much a part of human nature, that God had to really shake things up for Peter for him to get the message that he most needed to hear at that moment.

The distinctions crop up right at the very beginning of our text tonight. It's all about the "circumcised believers" getting riled up. You had to be circumcised to be part of the covenant that God established with our Jewish ancestors in the faith—leaves out about half of us right there, doesn't it?

So the Jewish men of Jerusalem were upset that the Gentiles too were hearing about Jesus and becoming followers. "But we're the best." "We're the ones who were in on it from the beginning." "Peter, how could you stoop to eating with those uncircumcised men?"

It's a position that's been taken since the dawn of humanity. Men are better. Whites are better. Heterosexuals are better. Americans are better. You name it, we've got a way to divide up the world and put ourselves at the top of the human heap.

So here's the heart of the matter. Peter tells his baffled and questioning friends that three men from Caesarea—they would have been Gentiles—came to visit him. And Peter says, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." And he said further, "If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" What a question.

Well, the naysayers couldn't argue with that. They were momentarily at a loss for words. But then, our text tells us, "They praised God, saying, 'Then God has given *even to the Gentiles*—even to *those people*—the repentance that leads to life.'" Hmm. Imagine!

Who are we that we can hinder God? And yet we keep trying. We're about twenty centuries removed from that conversation, and yet it keeps on going.

We're about twenty centuries removed from Peter's conversation with his friends, and yet it keeps on going.



Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama. Interesting to note that the campaign that became a turning point in the civil rights movement used a term that carries echoes of great suffering for our Muslim sisters and brothers. We just can't escape it, can we?

In 1963 Birmingham was in the grip of Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor and was considered the South's most segregated city. The leaders of the civil rights campaign decided to do something bold and controversial to try to break the stranglehold. They invited the children to lead them.

In 2004 I was collecting oral histories among our African-American UCC congregations in the Southeast, a project that led to the publication of the book *On the Heels of Freedom*. Among the people I interviewed was Odessa Woolfolk, who was a teacher in a public high school in Birmingham fifty years ago.

She told me, "I was teaching American government, and it was clear that [our textbooks] had one model of what freedom was, that was different from what was practiced in Birmingham, Alabama. It was pretty easy for the kids and the teachers to see this gap between promise and practice."

She remembers that some teachers were fired because of their involvement in the civil rights movement. But she and others persisted with courage. A wing of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is named in Odessa Woolfolk's honor.

The Birmingham Board of Education had declared that any child who marched would be marked absent and then expelled from school. Ms. Woolfolk told me, "I remember telling some of my kids that I could not say to them whether they should go march, go down and face Bull Connor's fire hoses and volleys of water—but that it was almost like you flunked government class if you showed up when everyone else was out there." None of her students showed up for her class. They chose to make history instead of just learning it that day.

Ms. Woolfolk remembers kids sneaking out behind the school's old band room, jumping the fence, and joining the march. They returned after having been held for several days in the Birmingham jail, or at the fairgrounds when the jail overflowed, showing up back in class waving small American flags, with a look on their faces, she said, that showed they had "done something significant."

Significant indeed. The images of Birmingham's children being attacked with police dogs and water cannons, which went out widely in newspapers and over TV, helped to change hearts and turn the tide of

public opinion against legalized segregation. We give thanks for all those brave children who risked their lives for equality.



Today is also Cinco de Mayo, the celebration of Mexican culture. If you listened to NPR this morning, you know that the U.S.-Mexico border is now the most murderous place on earth. Trapped in subsistence jobs in U.S.-based corporations known as *maquiladoras*, and caught up in the drug wars, Mexicans in the border area suffer extreme violence and poverty.

Many, as we know, are risking their lives to make their way here to Asheville and other parts of the U.S., in hopes of being able to feed their children and live in peace. And so we have added another category to our list of people who are “less than,” applying the labels “undocumented” and “illegal alien” to sister and brother human beings.

You would also have heard that President Obama is still pondering whether or not to attack Syria. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down, and so it's time to choose another enemy. If you haven't yet watched it, I commend to you the YouTube video that Ken Sehested sent to the Circle this morning along with his personal update on the situation with his family. Accompanied by Moby singing “Study War” is four minutes' worth of very moving and difficult images from wars in many times and places.

This weekend the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee held its annual gathering here in Asheville. Chris Berg and I attended, and Bill Ramsey had a significant role in planning it. Yesterday morning Bill presented checks to several organizations working for peace—thousands of dollars that war tax resisters had withheld and redirected to efforts promoting the common good instead of war.

After the presentations, we marched from the Federal Building downtown to a studio in the River Arts District for the rest of the conference. Bill and David Swanson, who has written several books against warmaking, convened a workshop in which David shared his reservations about practicing war tax resistance and Bill and others shared their experiences and convictions (both moral and in some cases legal).

It seemed a very rare exercise to me. David was brave to speak his concerns to a room full of mostly committed war tax resisters, and he received no judgment, anger, or pressure in response. People actually listened to one another. Space was created for truth to be spoken in safety and for hearts to be touched and changed.

I remember when my colleagues and I first began conducting interviews for *On the Heels of Freedom*. Our first stop was Atlanta, and we wondered whether our prepared questions were adequate to draw out painful stories from elders who have been targets of racism and discrimination. It turned out that our questions were extraneous. All we had to do was explain why we were there and turn on the tape recorder.

The stories poured out like water rushing through an opened floodgate. When I commented to an older gentleman after we had finished that I was amazed at how easily the stories flowed, he paused a moment, and then he said softly with tears pooling in his eyes, “Nobody ever asked before.”

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This planet would be a much better place if we learned to listen to one another, to ask about each other's stories—to try to understand the experience of those who inhabit a different skin color, or hail from

another home, or follow a different faith. Even those who vote for a different party and are up to things that go against all that we believe. Maybe then we could prevent yet another war from being launched.

Be careful of your dreams, friends. God may just have in mind a meaty dream for you. It may shock you. You may have some explaining to do to your friends. But Peter has already given us the answer to those who may raise questions: "The Spirit told me not to make a distinction between them and us."

Amen.