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The Episcopal Church of St. Benedict
Easter 5 – May 2, 2010
Acts 11:1-18

I still remember when I was a kid and I first heard this passage from Acts, about Peter and the large sheet being lowered from the sky full of unclean animals!

It was in worship, because this was not a story they ever taught us about in Sunday School, and it's just so outlandish.

I found a picture of the scene to put on our bulletins (see last page of this sermon) because I wanted you to be able to really see it and see what unclean animals are – the animals Jews cannot eat.

(We don't eat many of them either!)

Most Jews still keep kosher, thousands of years after they received the dietary laws from God that we can still read in the first five books of the bible.

Jews don't eat pork or shellfish, and they don't eat meat and dairy products in the same meal. Now, why make such a fuss over food? Well, because food is a big deal.

Now, to understand what happened to Peter, I want you to think a little bit about food. There are probably foods that you like to eat over and over again.

Foods that you tend to have for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, again and again.

Foods that you're used to, that, when you eat them, make you feel comfortable and nourished. Food is as psychological as it is physical.

And we all eat a little bit differently. Different cultures, different families, and just different individuals.

When I was first getting to know Adam, I was really thrown by his eating habits.

I remember one particular evening we were talking on the phone and I asked Adam what he was doing. And he told me that he was having a glass of red wine and eating some *Cheetos*. Bleh! (I began to seriously question whether I could keep dating this guy!)

But then, several months later, while I was having a glass of red wine, I felt hungry and went looking around the kitchen for something to snack on, and what did I find myself cramming into my mouth, but Cheetos! (Cheetos that Adam had left in my kitchen, I might add.) And you may laugh, but food is a big part of how we see ourselves, and foods we eat and don't eat are part of how we understand who we are as people. Accurately, or not.

But what Peter saw in the giant bedsheet wasn't food he didn't like, it was food he'd been taught his whole life not to eat!

Dr. Frank Yamada, who was here a few weeks ago to talk about the bible and sexuality for adult ed. spoke about this a bit – how there are certain foods that our cultures teach us we should never eat, even though in other cultures people eat them happily and safely.

So, think about this a little bit with me, and see how many of these “gross you out”:

raw fish, raw meat, blood, horsemeat, seaweed, grasshoppers, monkey brains, fermented yak's milk, sheep's stomach... ok I'll stop.
But see what a strong feeling of disgust you can get in your guts over these foods? Foods that in another country, a family having you over for dinner would serve you with pride and gusto.
That disgust is what Peter felt when he saw that sheet and heard God say, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat."

And that is part of why it was so hard for the first Christians, who were Jews, to accept all these new people – because they ate *gross food*. And they lived in a *gross way* – the men weren't circumcised, the people didn't follow Jewish sexual codes, they didn't wash their bodies or their dishes in the same ways Jews did, their meat wasn't slaughtered in the correct way.
The Gentiles were *gross*.

"Get up Peter, kill and eat," God says. Join these people. Eat with them. Get over your disgust, and see them as Christians, just like you. And share a meal with them.

We human beings don't much like to be with people who aren't like them. Life is full of change and chaos as it is and so it's less stressful to spend time with people who don't challenge our comfort zone, who don't bring any more change and chaos into our life than what we already have to deal with.
And so, it's easier to be friends with people who are like us. That seems obvious. People who like the same restaurants we do, who eat what we do, who drink alcohol like we do or don't, who believe what we do about God, Jesus, and the president, who have a family or cultural background like ours, who make about the same kind of income we do. We like to be with people who remind us of ourselves – people who feel like home. Now, that's not a sin.
It's not a sin to hang out with people who are like us.

But it might be a sin to avoid people who aren't like us. To decide that we're normal, and certain other people are not. And it's really easy to imagine that we don't do this... but I think we all do. I know there are certain kinds of people who make me feel uncomfortable. And I'm sure there are certain kinds of people who make you feel uncomfortable. Now, I don't mean people you dislike for their personalities, because that's different. I mean people who make you uncomfortable because of how they live their life – like Peter and the Jews and the Gentiles.
People who can make us uncomfortable because of: their politics, their culture, their life choices, their cooking, their clothes... Where, when you see them (or perhaps read their letters to the editor in the local paper), you feel squeamish or awkward, or maybe even angry.
That's what it means when God tells Peter, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat."

And so, maybe we should try a meal that disgusts us sometime,

and push ourselves to see if it's really so bad?
Would something terrible *really* happen to us if we ate a grasshopper?

God makes us all one in Christ, and Christ tells us to love one another.
God made us all, and so all of us (and yet none of us) are normal.
None of us are God's baseline for a perfect humanity.
We are all made in the image of God, as we are told in the first chapter of the first book of the bible.

And so Peter hears in his vision, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

And then Peter sees that these Gentiles are Christians, too. And that it is good and right that he go eat with them. Their way of life, despite what God had taught him and his people for centuries, is not an impediment to salvation.

They can eat meat and milk together AND be believing, normal, ordinary Christians.

So, eat a grasshopper sometime, or try red wine and Cheetos,
or ask someone who makes you really uncomfortable a respectful, getting-to-know-you question.

And you will learn something profound about what God intended about love, Creation, and the way of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

