

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace from God our Father  
And the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Our first reading from the book of Acts is one of my favorite stories. The writer is the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke. Luke tells the story of Jesus, Acts tells the story of the church. Luke begins with the birth of Jesus, in a lowly stable in the middle of nowhere.

The book of Acts ends with a story of the gospel spreading to Rome; at that time, the center of the universe. God enters the world through a young girl, with a plan to redeem the entire world.

In our reading from Acts the gospel message crosses huge cultural and religious barriers.

I love this story-- for one reason because we're Gentiles-- this is our story; this is where you and I are grafted into this Abrahamic faith! But I also love this story because it dramatically demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit; the power to connect and include— To bring people who have nothing in common, to become people who are now brothers and sisters.

As you read the book of Acts, change happens quickly... People come to faith, thousands of them at a time. Not only large numbers of people, but influential people too-- priests and scribes. People sell everything they have; they pool their

resources and share as any have need. They set up organizational structures to manage the change.

And all along, the Holy Spirit is leading the way and sometimes it feels a little out of control. Our story today is one of those instances; the Holy Spirit takes a turn that catches the Apostles by surprise.

Peter is in a trance and he has a vision, a large sheet coming down from heaven; he sees four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. And he hears a voice 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But he's repulsed... in effect he replies, "No, my God forbids it, it's disgusting, it will never enter my mouth."

In Peter's theological world, the observance of these food laws is about covenantal relationship with God. When Peter hears the voice, "What God has made, you must not call disgusting," this is a big problem...

In effect, God is asking Peter and the apostles to set aside the religious convictions that have been handed down to them through Moses, through countless generations of tradition and contained in sacred writing. This is a huge; monumental shift!

Only through the power of the Holy Spirit could such a change occur. It is a radical movement toward inclusiveness; a movement to bring outsiders inside; it is a movement to bring those who don't fit in-- to a place of deep belonging. Do you see the direction of this shift?

This radical inclusion really stretches our comfort zone. As human beings, our dualistic brains split the world in two. And we tend to be pretty concerned about judging -- Who are like us and who are different than us?

We make categories of people... Who are in and who are out... And unfortunately, for us religious people this is really difficult. We know God loves us, and we're not always so sure God loves people who are different. Let's be honest, one of the criticisms of religious people is that they can be judgmental! And I know this is something I work on in my own spiritual life...

A Painful Story...

This experience happened six years when I was on Sabbatical. I don't like to tell this story, because frankly, it's not one of my better moments... I took several motorcycle trips that summer.

On one of the trips, I went around the north shore of Lake Superior, through Sault Ste Marie, across the Mackinac Bridge down along the eastern side of Lake Michigan, and I took a ferry, the SS Badger across the Lake.

On the boat, I was in the dining room spread out with all my motorcycle stuff, and at the table next to me were four gentlemen talking about biblical translation and churchy things. I was reading a theological book with heavy Christian imagery on the cover. And one of the guys noticed me and nodded that I should join them.

At first, I resisted, being content to read, but what little of their conversation I could hear, I started to get interested. So, I stood up and moved over, asked if I could join their conversation.

We were doing introductions, I proudly said, “I’m Todd, I serve at St Olaf Lutheran church in Austin Minn.” Immediately one of the men asked if that was an ELCA congregation... I proudly said yes... And suddenly things seemed to change.

One of the men was a New Testament Professor at a fundamental Seminary in Texas. I sat and listened to him for a good long time, and it reminded me of my childhood. I grew up in a church that tended to be that way.

He talked about God demanding blood sacrifice, and how God condemned all sinners to hell... I kind of wondered if he was talking that way because of me... And I was feeling tighter and tighter all the time.

Finally, I got up the nerve and I told them my story. I didn’t want to debate theology with them; I only wanted to tell my story. I talked about the church I grew up in. I talked about how messages of an angry and spiteful God drove me away from church.

I talked about how God continued to pursue me. How I found myself going to a Lutheran Church. How I started to hear the Gospel in its pure form, as Luther calls it... How God chose me in baptism... How I ended up in Seminary...

When I was done, they all looked at each other; I could tell a couple of them were uneasy.

The Professor looked at the others, and then he asked me a question, “Do you believe Jonah was swallowed by a whale?” Ahhh... I thought to myself, stay calm,

just answer with your own experience... but I could feel myself becoming defensive...

I made reference to the fact we were on a boat like Jonah, and hopefully they wouldn't throw me over. They didn't seem amused... I said I believed it was a parable, like parables Jesus would teach... And that the truth of the story for me, is that people have a hard time with undeserved forgiveness.

The professor cut me short and said I was wrong. He said that the story was meant to test our faith. And only true believers could believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. He dismissed my story, my faith... and I was feeling very judged. I even felt like he was mocking me.

I said, "Well then, let me ask you a question... We have four accounts of the crucifixion story... what were Jesus' last words from the cross?"

He appeared to think hard and actually started to give a wrong answer. I cut him short and said, "You should have asked me according to which Gospel because Jesus says something different in each one. And as a New Testament Professor you should know that." I returned evil for evil...

I looked at the other three people and they were horrified. And in that instant, I saw myself through their eyes. And repentance happened... I quickly apologized, for my rude behavior. But the damage was done. And I was embarrassed. My religious judgmental behavior had got the better of me.

We all still shook hands when we were finished talking. But for me it was an awful experience. It felt like I crucified a little part of myself that day; and I hope to remember that incident every time I start feeling so superior. Pain can lead to gain... Perhaps that self-awareness can be a little resurrection for me...

The inclusiveness of this gospel challenges and stretches us. Sometimes it is like bearing a cross, to love one another. I pray for those people on the boat- and for myself... I pray that God would teach me to love the Christians that are different than myself. And although I failed that day, I have hope that one day that conversation can and will be different.

The good news this morning is that we have a powerful God, a God who pursues us, a God who takes outsiders and brings them in; a God who makes brothers and sisters of people who have nothing in common. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Our God breaks down barriers. We are people of the resurrection and reconciliation; we are children of the Heavenly father, we deeply belong; and all together, we are in this family of God.

Amen...