

Fifth Weekend of Easter (RCL/C): "God's Got Some 'Splainin' to Do!"
Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35
May 14-15, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Lucy, you have some 'splainin' to do!" Name that character! Name that classic TV show! Yup, Ricky Ricardo in "I Love Lucy," about a million years ago! (Extra credit for knowing that Desi Arnaz played Ricky opposite his wife Lucille Ball.)

In today's first lesson from Acts, Peter has "some 'splainin' to do" when he returns to Jerusalem from a mission trip. He's not welcomed back with a banner and balloons; instead he faces a mini-inquisition. The folks back home ask him what the heck he was thinking when he sat down to eat with Gentiles. (They may not have had phones or internet in the 1st century, but the grapevine worked just fine and news traveled fast.)

The earliest Christians were observant Jews, and observant Jews didn't eat with just anyone. We know that from the criticism of Jesus: "He eats with tax collectors and sinners!" And those tax collectors and sinners were Jews; they just weren't observant. Cornelius and his household, whom we hear about today, weren't Jews at all. They were Gentiles. Cornelius and the other men in his family circle weren't circumcised. And that was a **big** problem when it came to mealtime. Because uncircumcised people were considered unclean. And if you ate beside unclean people, **you** became unclean. That meant you couldn't worship as God commanded, because you had to be clean to worship. Remember how the Jews wouldn't go into Pilate's headquarters when they delivered Jesus to him for judgment? Because simply entering a Gentile's home (or place of business, apparently) would render them unclean to celebrate Passover. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan and how the priest crossed the road to put distance between himself and the guy

in the ditch? The priest could have been on his way to serve in the Temple, and if he came into contact with a dead body or even with blood he'd become unclean and unable to serve.

All of which probably sounds pretty crazy to us. But let's try to look at it from the inside out. God has repeatedly told the children of Israel, "I am holy. You be holy." To be holy is to be set apart for God's purposes. To be holy is to be different. It's to be circumcised when nobody else is. It's to have special dietary laws. It's to follow very specific hygiene guidelines. It's to be clean and to avoid contagion from anything or anyone that's unclean. "I am holy. You be holy." "Set yourselves apart!"

Which Peter's been doing his whole life. And then one day he's praying so hard he falls into a trance. He has a vision of a floating zoo descending from the sky and he hears a heavenly voice commanding, "*Get up, Peter; kill and eat.*" (Acts 11:7) "No way, Lord. I've never had a BLT or a pork chop and I'm not going to start now."

The voice spoke again: 'If God says it's okay, it's okay.' This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

(Acts 11:9, *The Message*)

Then there's a knock on the door and 3 guys invite Peter to go with them to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile.

The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying, 'Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He'll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.'

15-17 "So I started in, talking. Before I'd spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as he did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus' words: 'John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?"

Exactly what did it mean that the Holy Spirit fell on them? Peter says, “...just as he did on us the first time.” ‘Sounds like Pentecost: tongues of flame, speaking in languages they’d never learned but which others understood.

So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?”

“Peter, you have some ‘splainin’ to do!” And he does: I had a God-given vision. The Holy Spirit spoke to my heart. I witnessed the coming of that Spirit into others’ lives. How could I refuse to baptize these people? How could I refuse to have a meal with them? God is doing a brand new thing. Who am I to stand in the way? *‘If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.’*

This story is so important that St. Luke, the author of this Book of Acts, the sequel to the Gospel according to St. Luke, tells it twice. Go home and either Google or open your Bible to Acts 10. It’s the same story, except in real time. In this following chapter, Acts 11, Peter recounts the story. Again. One Bible commentator has pointed out that the original Book of Acts, handwritten on papyrus, would have been the equivalent of a 35 foot roll.¹ That’s as long as you could go before starting a new roll. Authors weighed very carefully what to include. Every letter, every word was precious. You got to the point as quickly as you could, you whittled it down to the essentials, you cut the narrative to the bone. **And St. Luke considers this story so important, he tells it twice.** *‘If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.’*

¹⁸Hearing it all laid out like that, [the critics] quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. “It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!”

(Acts 11:18, *The Message*)

“...God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

(Acts 11:18, NRSV)

God is the Source. It’s God who literally and figuratively allowed the scales to fall from Saul’s eyes after Jesus’ and his encounter on the road to Damascus, and it’s God who

breaks through what someone has called Peter's "religious parochialism," shown in what he says to Cornelius when he enters his house:

"You know, I'm sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don't do this—visit and relax with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. But now I'd like to know why you sent for me."

Cornelius says:

*"...we're all here in God's presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us." [What beautiful openness....] ³⁴⁻³⁶ Peter fairly exploded with his good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone." (Acts 10:33-36, *The Message*)*

It makes no difference who you are or where you're from. We're glad for that, when it comes to ourselves. But how 'bout the others whom we might suspect of being unclean? I **really** don't want to admit it, but I **might** be tempted to think of others as less worthy than me?

It's tough to get away from "us" and "them" thinking, especially when we've **thought** and even been **taught** one way for a very long time. But God is always striving to open our hearts to the Son. God is always trying to move us along for the sake of the Kingdom. God wants to use **us** to embrace more and more of God's children, to sweep more and more of this creation into God's Kingdom. But we have to be **open** to being shaped and reshaped, formed and reformed more and more into vessels the Lord can use to carry the Good News.

The way Peter Seggel put it when some of us were discussing this at Wed. evening virtual prayer was, "**Do** we know it all?" And when I realize I **don't** know it all (not even close!) can I sheepishly admit, honestly confess, "I've been so dumb"? **That's what repenting is:** 'fessing up to God, "I've been so dumb." "I got it so wrong." "I was so nearsighted." "I see now I acted out of selfish self-interest." Or: "I knew even then it was hurtful [or dishonest] and I did it anyway." **"Please forgive."**

As Christians we believe “insight” comes from the Holy Spirit within. I can’t discern what is true on my own. I can’t weigh my actions objectively on my own. I can’t recognize my sin and drum up repentance on my own. I can’t turn toward the Light on my own. But I can trust my God to enlighten my heart, expose my failures in love, fill me with sadness for sin and desire for God’s forgiveness, open me up to what I can only receive as gift and never merit as reward.

I found this message of hope in the book *by heart: Conversations with Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* that I mention in the *May Lamplighter Pastor’s Pen*:

Wherever and whenever God addresses us with the “living Word” ... God turns the rudder each day so that we sail in a new direction.²

The Lord can use prayer, visions, audibles from the Holy Spirit, visits from strangers and other channels to prompt us to sail in new directions, which Peter certainly did when he met Cornelius. We may have to explain ourselves to those who haven’t experienced the visions, heard the messages or received the visits from strangers, but Peter’s logic, his way of ‘splainin’ the change should work for us, too: “... *how could I object to God?*” It’s not always Scripture that first tweaks our conscience or awakens our heart. As one wise person has written, “... God’s prodding is sometimes felt within us or first observed in the bustle of life around us. Often our opinion is reversed for the Lord’s sake by our [real-time] encounters with the Holy Spirit in the mess and muck of ordinary living.”³ Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Acts of Apostles* (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 86.

²*by heart: Conversations with Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), p. 15.

³*New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. X* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 172.

