

## **"Welcoming the Unexpected:" Peter and the Six Brothers**

Year C, Easter 5 | Acts 11:1-18 | May 15, 2022

Rev. Samm Melton-Hill | Highlands Lutheran Church | Denver, CO

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### **Sun. May 15 — Fifth Sunday of Easter Baptism of Seneca-Wilde**

#### **Readings**

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148 (13)

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

#### **Prayer of the Day**

O Lord God, you teach us that without love, our actions gain nothing. Pour into our hearts your most excellent gift of love, that, made alive by your Spirit, we may know goodness and peace, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

#### **Gospel Acclamation**

Alleluia. Everyone will know that you are | my disciples  
if you have love for | one another. Alleluia. (John 13:35)

**Color:** White

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#### **Acts 11:1-18**

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he

gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

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*To the God who loves, cares, and nurtures, may we be both challenged and comforted by your good news. Amen.*

As many of you know, this past week, myself and several other members from Highlands attended the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly. This is an annual gathering of people from congregations and communities all throughout the Synod, covering Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, Utah, and a little sliver of West Texas. We gather for church business, worship, learning, and oftentimes, simply to be in community with one another.

So as I was reading our texts for today, I couldn't help but think about my colleague's who shared about their recent trip to the Holy Land along with the theme of Synod Assembly, which was "welcoming the unexpected." During their trip to the Holy Land, my colleagues recently had an opportunity to visit this neat little hotel that was designed by Banksy, a controversial and popular street artist that continues to hide his true identity. He has designed this hotel called "The Walled Off Hotel," which garners its name from being placed just four meters from the wall that separates the Israeli occupied West Bank town of Bethlehem from Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the wall itself is controversial and Banksy's art often draws attention to contemporary political and social issues, thus why they have chosen to build a hotel directly next to the wall.

Banksy draws our attention to the issues that have plagued mankind for eternity. We have so often built literal and figurative walls to keep people out of spaces that we believe are ours, to make territories, to define who is in and who is out. In doing so, we communicate who is welcome, who belongs, and who is undeserving of whatever might lie on the inside of our boundaries. The church is of course no stranger to this. So, perhaps our first reading from Acts this morning, a story about God challenging Peter's own beliefs about belonging, isn't all that surprising.

Similar to the issues of our time, Peter is working with a community that has clearly defined insiders and outsiders. Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor retells this story in a more modern lens.

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Dyke. "[Banksy West Bank hotel with 'worst view' to receive first guests.](#)" *The Times of Israel*. 20 March 2017.

She writes from Peter's perspective, which I believe helps us to better understand the story. From his perspective the story goes that, "The heavens opened and something like a large sheet came down, lowered to the ground by its four corners. When I looked inside it, I saw every kind of forbidden creature—camels, badgers, buzzards, bats, crocodiles, lizards, a pig—all the things on the "don't eat" list in Leviticus 11, part of our holy law. And then I heard a voice that said, "Get up, Peter: Kill and eat." I knew it was God's voice. I recognized it. But I just could not do what God was telling me to do. It went against everything I had heard before. It went against everything I was taught, against all the Torah I had memorized and applied to my life, against everything my parents had ever said about faithful living. And then God said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and then the sheet went back into heaven."<sup>2</sup>

Here, Peter is recounting the preceding event that eventually leads him to welcome strangers into the house. Peter "welcomes the unexpected" because he has been inspired and challenged to do so by God. He welcomes the unexpected so much so that he is led to invite these strangers, those he previously would not have interacted with, to sit down and share a meal together, to even stay for a few nights, and eventually, radically, comes to see that the Holy Spirit has blessed the Gentiles in the same way he has blessed the followers of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Again, we hear a story of the radical new world that is found in following Jesus. This story in Acts tells us about Israelites communing with Gentiles which transgresses long-established boundaries deemed fundamental to the vocation of God's people, Israel.<sup>4</sup> That Gentiles would be gifted with the Holy Spirit, and thus be granted a place in God's new world, was itself an astonishing development for these Israelite believers! But even more unfathomable to some

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor (1997). *The Bread of Angels*. The Rowman and Littleman Publishing Group: Maryland. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 11:11-18. "At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

<sup>4</sup> Karl Kuhn. ["Commentary on Acts 11: 1-18."](#) *Working Preacher*. 15 May 2022.

was the notion that Israelites would share the table with Gentiles. Again, we hear of the ways in which God breaks through our human-made barriers. This is perhaps a classic story from Acts, in which we learn how welcoming the stranger allows Peter to understand that the “way he has always done it,” isn’t the only way. When we “welcome the unexpected,” God reveals that there is a more vast, more welcoming, and more expansive kingdom of God than we could have ever imagined.

What is most remarkable about this story is not simply the message of God’s kingdom having no boundaries, but it also acts as a reminder that God already dwells in those places that us humans believe God could not possibly be. It was “God who acted first. It is God who visits Cornelius before giving Peter his vision. Peter does not “bring” the divine to the Gentiles, but rather follows where God already is!”<sup>5</sup> “The Church has inflicted centuries of harm on others by thinking we were bringing the divine, the good news to others, ignorant of the fact that God is already there.” It was God who acted first.

As good as we are at creating boundaries, we are just as good as holding on too tightly to our ideas of those boundaries. During this past election season, I recall reading a study that spoke about how people come to change their minds.<sup>6</sup> There were a number of scenarios in which people who held firmly to certain political beliefs were shown factual evidence intended to convince them of a logical argument, an attempt to change their minds. I don’t believe we are too shocked to learn that this did not work. In fact, it actually made people retreat into their own beliefs further, doubling down so to say on what they believe.

But, all hope is not lost. There is one way researchers found that does actually change people’s minds. It is only through personal engagement with others, through hearing stories from those these laws or elections would affect, and becoming emotionally invested, did people change their minds. For example, those who were once opposed to universal healthcare changed their minds when they heard stories from people who had been deeply harmed by the current healthcare system. Those who were once staunchly against rights for LGBTQ+ folx, such as same-sex marriage and trans rights, only changed their minds when they learned of the heartache and suffering experienced by so many in these communities. And lastly, those who

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<sup>5</sup> [“Easter 5C.” Pulpit Fiction](#). 15 May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Claudia Hammond. [“The surprising reason people change their mind.” BBC](#). 22 June 2018.

stood firm in their anti-immigration beliefs only changed their minds when they met immigrants and heard their stories.

I'm not sure we needed an expensive research study to tell us this. I think on some human level, we already know it, yet we are still fearful at times. Similarly to this study, British philosopher Alain de Botton has suggested that we simply share meals with those who disagree with us. He says that "Sitting down at a table with a group of strangers has the incomparable and odd benefit of making it a little more difficult to hate them with impunity. Prejudice and ethnic strife feed off abstraction. However, the proximity required by a meal – something about handing dishes around, unfurling napkins at the same moment, even asking a stranger to pass the salt – disrupts our ability to cling to the belief that the outsiders who wear unusual clothes and speak in distinctive accents deserve to be sent home or assaulted. For all the large-scale political solutions which have been proposed to solve ethnic conflict, there are few more effective ways to promote tolerance between suspicious neighbors than to force them to eat supper together."<sup>7</sup> "Facts don't change our minds. Friendship does."<sup>8</sup>

The story of Peter has already taught us this. When we welcome the unexpected, we see God in the unexpected. When we sit down to dinner with others, we are challenged to expand our ideas of what or who is right or wrong.

It is important to add that when we welcome the unexpected, it is not to condone harm or remain complacent in suffering. In fact, it is quite the opposite. When we welcome the unexpected, when we begin to see God is already dwelling in these unexpected places, we release ourselves from the suffering inflicted upon us by our own human-made boundaries. We know we are welcoming God, welcoming the divine into our lives, when weight of suffering is lightened for ourselves or others.

We as humans, just like Paul, are capable of expanding our worldviews, are capable of seeing the goodness in all people. In this research study, I can place myself in the participants' shoes, I might often say there is no way God is present in [fill in the blank]. There is no chance that person could possibly have the gift of the holy spirit. I could never love a person who [fill in the

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<sup>7</sup> James Clear. "[Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds.](#)" ncaCPA. 20 February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

blank]. And yet God comes along and says, yes you can. You are capable of such love when you remember that the beauty of the divine is already there. You are not tasked in bringing it, but are challenged to see it.

Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer agrees saying that “Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.” We are invited into God’s new world.

I want to leave you this morning with one of my favorite pieces by Banksy. It is a street art piece where he paints a series of birds who are sharing a telephone wire together.<sup>9</sup> On one side, you have a group of birds, appearing to be pigeons, who are holding signs that read things like, “Migrants not welcome,” “go back to Africa,” and “keep off our worms.” And on the right side, there is a single bird looking at this group, who is full of color, something like a magpie or jay.



Art is often a powerful tool and I believe Banksy is communicating a similar message as the story from Peter, just some 2000 years later. The birds on the left, protesting the arrival of the beautiful gifted bird can’t see its beauty and gifts. They are so wrapped up in keeping what appears to be theirs. They don’t want change, change feels threatening. And yet, as outsiders, we can see the beauty that this group can not see. We see a gorgeous bird that would bring beauty and newness and creativity to this community.

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<sup>9</sup> The painting first appeared in Clacton, England in 2014. Photo and story from: [“Banksy anti-immigration birds mural in Clacton-on-Sea destroyed.” BBC](#). 1 October 2014

I invite you to reflect this week on what “welcoming the unexpected” means for you, in your life. My hope is that this art acts as a reminder to you to continue contemplating the meaning of Peter’s story this week.

*May you find peace in the chaos, beauty in the unexpected, and love in the unpredictable. In Jesus’ name we take this message of the good news with us this week. Amen.*