

## **“Peter’s Bacon-Wrapped Lobster Dream”**

**Acts 11: 1-18**

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**May 19, 2019**

### **Fifth Sunday of Easter**

What was life like for the apostles and disciples after Jesus rose from the grave? How was life different in a post-resurrection world? That is what the book of Acts helps us to see.

In biblical times, they had very small houses. More like lean-to’s on the side of other buildings. Ordinary people who lived in cities tightly packed together in these little bitty homes. So they spent a lot of time outside. In the streets.

They cooked and ate their meals outside. Their diet consisted largely of lentils, bread, dates, nuts, olives. For a snack, maybe grasshoppers or crickets. Meat was not an everyday thing, but every other day or so you did might have some fish. Once in a while, on some big festival day, you’d get a little beef. Meat would not keep without refrigeration, so mostly they would have to cook it the day it was butchered.

Imagine Peter walking through the neighborhood, he had his oatmeal for breakfast. One the day his Gentiles neighbors had butchered a pig. Everybody who got a part of the pig would be cooking on the same day. Peter’s walking through the street, bombarded by the smell of bacon.

Everywhere.... Baaaaconnnn.

And Peter can’t have any.

Imagine when his neighbors got a special treat fishing. Imagine when they were boiling up a pot of lobster. Served it up smothered in cheese sauce. Lobster wrapped in baaaaconnnn.

And Peter can’t have any.

After walking around in the street, no wonder he goes into a trance! But this is not a dream Peter wants to dream. He is a passionately religious guy. This dream makes him feel extremely guilty. This dream is an abomination. But he dreams the dream three times. And finally God gets through to him: Peter, get up; it’s time to eat.

Before we get to the end of the story, why exactly can’t Peter have any bacon? Because he pays attention to the Scripture. The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are quite detailed about what a faithful Jewish family can and cannot eat: Leviticus 11: “These are the things which you may eat: Whatever animals part the hoof and are cloven footed and chew cud.”

Beef is OK: meets all three criteria. If it does some of those, but not all: it is unclean.

No eating camels: its hoofs are funky.

No to rock badgers: it chews cud, but its feet are funky.

No to rabbits: it chews the cud, but its feet are funky.

No to pork, because its hooves are fine, but it doesn't chew cud.

Yes to fish, that live in the water and have fins and scales.

No to things that live in the water, but do not have fins or scales.

No lobster. No shrimp. No frog legs.

Yes to chicken. Yes to quail.

No to vulture. No falcon. No crow. No owl. No pelican. No to bats.

Does that clear it all up? Does all make sense? I guess you are thinking, probably not.

A lot of people over the years have said: Well, this was their way of not eating things that would make them sick. But Bible scholars call that answer scientific reductionism. Trying to reduce it to easy terms that explain it away and make the people of the time look simplistic. That does not explain these texts. There are plenty of things on the list are not going to make you sick. There is something else going on.

Mary Douglas in her classic study on Purity and Danger gives most helpful insights. She says every culture has to have a sense of order. How they think about things, see things. So cultures divide things up according to the way they see things. Cultural categories.

A little girl asked her mother, "Where do people come from?"

Mom told her: People are created in the image of God."

She asked her dad: "Where do people come from?"

Dad told her: People evolved from monkeys.

She went back to her mom, "Dad says people come from monkeys.

You say people come from God. Which is it?"

Mom says, "Oh, Daddy's talking about his side of the family."

We all have our categories. Think about it in this way:

Say that I want to fix Ice Cream Sundays for the whole congregation. From the pulpit. I put a huge bowl down on the floor -- the bowl is completely sterile and 6 feet wide. Inside are smaller bowls for your ice cream Sunday. I start dipping into big vats of ice cream and dropping them down. Vanilla. Chocolate. Rocky Road. Butter brickle. Tutti Frutti. I'm dipping them out one scoop at a time. It's melting while I do it. I get a fair amount of ice cream into the little bowls. I lot also splashes out over the sides into the big bowl.

Then I add the toppings: Chocolate, Strawberry, Cherry, Butterscotch. The longer I pour, the less I care about accuracy. Hot fudge, Nuts, Sprinkles.

Now which bowl are you going to eat from? The little bitty individual bowl?

Or the big bowl where all the stuff is mixed together?

This is a lesson in philosophy: From Aristotle to Kant to Foucault, philosophers have been debating about how we think about reality in terms of categories. For Kant, reality is referred to as a Thing-In-Itself and can only be discerned based on the cultural categories into which we divide things.

The Hebrews, as a culture, had their categories – the bowls that gave order for what they would eat. Does it have cloven hoof, does it chew cud, does it live in the water. As long as a food fit their categories, it was good/holy/edible.

But if something does not fit their category, it is confusing. What do you call it? How do you think about it? How do you act toward it? The stuff that is in the bowl is good/holy/whole.

What is outside the bowl, what is outside of the category is mixed up. It is impure. It is polluted. It is an abomination. The Hebrew word is: *tebhel*: mixed up; confused.

If holiness of God's creation is about creating order which separates that which should be separated, then certain animals are pure. Good. Edible.

What is polluted, impure or an abomination must not be eaten or even touched.

Peter has this dream. In the power of the Holy Spirit, he has this God given dream in which God says: Stop worrying about your cultural categories. They are like a team jersey. It's nice to know who you are. But it does not mean something outside of your category is an abomination.

This whole discussion may have to do with ethics: but it is the artistic side of ethics. More on the order of aesthetics. You want a Rembrandt, but you get a Van Gogh. You want a Turner but you get a Picasso. I used to not like the works of Jackson Pollock. It made no sense. It was an abomination. I had only seen reproductions. Then one day in an art museum, I stood still long enough to see what a Pollock painting had to say. I was changed. It was like blinders came off my eyes.

This same idea of cultural categories applies to human beings. It was only 140 years ago this month that the country changed its understanding of the first Americans.

Look at the story of Chief Standing Bear of the Ponca Indian Tribe. The Ponca had always lived in the Niobrara River Valley in Northern Nebraska, South Dakota border. The Secretary of the Interior directed that they be relocated to Oklahoma. It was a 500 mile march. Many of the Ponca tribe died either on the way, or soon after they arrived.

One who died was Chief Standing Bear's only son, 16 year old Bear Shield. Before he died, he asked his father to promise that he would bury him not in Oklahoma, but back in the Niobrara River valley.

So a few days after Christmas, Standing Bear and 28 others trekked through sub-zero winter snow, to take him back for burial. It was a brutal journey. They walked for months, and were within two days of their destination when the army arrested them and took them back to Fort Omaha. Standing

Bear's heart-breaking story was picked up the newspaper – the story of this father keeping a promise to his son.

An astounding thing happened from that newspaper story. Two attorney's, including the chief attorney for the Union Pacific Railroad, took on Standing Bear's case and sued that he had been unlawfully arrested. At the trial, another astounding thing happened. Judge Dundee, a bear-hunting, Indian hating man, allowed Standing Bear, an Indian, to speak. Raising his right hand Standing Bear said,

“This hand is not the same color as yours.  
But if I pierce it, I shall feel pain.  
If you pierce your hand, you also will feel pain.  
The blood will be of the same color as yours.  
I am a man.  
The same God made us both.”

Judge Elmer Dundee took the case under advisement. He studied and thought about it for two weeks. Dundee set Standing Bear free, because he ruled that a Native American is a human being and under the U.S. Constitution entitled to all its rights and protections. It was only one-hundred and forty years ago that for the first time Native Americans were legally recognized as human beings.

You see, the categories that we have in our culture can blind us from seeing the humanity of other human beings. That's why Peter's dream matters so profoundly. Peter has a dream that takes the blinders off. Peter's dream breaks away the cultural categories to see a new world.

This dream comes from his experience of Jesus: where someone has been battered down, but not forgotten or abandoned by God. God lifts him up to new life, new reality. The story of Jesus continues in the post-resurrection world where God keeps raising the dead and breaking down the walls of separation: between men and women, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, all races, all religions. We recognize the God-created humanity of one another. The power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life keeps lifting us up anew like Peter's dream.

Francois Clemons played the part of Officer Clemons on the TV show *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* for 25 years. Francois was gay. Fred Rogers started out personally opposed to being gay. And said that the show could not talk about or even symbolize it on the show because of the sponsors. But along the way, Mr. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, changed his mind. One day, Mr. Rogers sang his song: “There are many ways to say I love you. There are many ways to say I care.” That was the day Francois heard it differently. After the show, he asked Mr. Rogers: “Fred, are you singing to me?” Mr. Rogers said, “I've been singing to you for two years.” Francois said, “That was when Fred became my surrogate father.”

Mr. Rogers changed his mind. That is the on-going story of Peter's dream coming true. The trajectory of the resurrection is an on-going lifting up of the despised, the dejected, the rejected to new life.

That dream is still dreaming about us and our world.  
For people with handicapping conditions – we’re still dreaming.  
For GLBTQ people – we’re still dreaming.  
For racial barriers in people’s minds – we’re still dreaming.  
For barriers between religions that need to accept one another – we’re still dreaming.

We know what the Holy Spirit told Peter: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” The world struggles with this, but people of faith have been gifted with this liberating dream.

I am grateful for the House of Hope – a congregation who had had members and pastors who have been open and willing to share this dream with the church, with the denomination and with the nation. To help share Peter’s outrageous bacon-wrapped lobster dream that sets people free. What God has blessed, we need to celebrate. Those who God has blessed, we need to bless. God’s dream is for all of us. We’ve been given this dream and it is our call -- to make sure that everyone experiences themselves as the beautiful dream of God that they are.

Sources:

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Standing Bear and family