

Gracious Love Has No Limits 2022  
 Isaiah 25:1, 6-9 Acts 11:1-18

### Acts 11:1-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

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."

### Isaiah 25:1, 6-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

A small boy was restless and fidgety during the sermon one Sunday,  
 until his mother whispered in his ear:

*"Your noise is going to distract the preacher,  
 and if he loses his place, he'll have to start over again.*

**I was quiet as a mouse after that.**

As a Christian, as a believer and follower of Jesus Christ,  
 we never really know just when God is going to shake things up,  
 and bring us to an unexpected and extraordinary experience,  
 so to participate in what God has been up to all along.

The passage we read earlier from the book of Acts  
is really a continuation of a much larger and grander story.  
It's around lunchtime, and Peter is up on the roof in prayer,  
when he has a vision in which a picnic blanket descends from the sky...

... which is loaded with all kinds of unclean and repulsive foods  
that no observant Jew would ever consider being willing eat,  
and he hears God's voice telling him to get up, kill and eat. vs. 8-10

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.

To appreciate how shocking this was, we need to recognize  
that religious dietary rules were to demonstrate commitment to God,  
and were at the very heart and a distinguishing feature  
that had symbolized and identified who the Jews  
understood themselves to be as the people of God.

**Food restrictions were a crucial part of Jewish self-understanding.**

In the next verses, this vision is clarified as **a teaching-parable**,  
when servants sent from a Roman Centurion ask Peter  
to come with them to meet their master, Cornelius. vs. 11-12

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... and we entered  
the man's house.

An observant and religious Jew  
would never willingly enter the home of a gentile outsider.  
But through his vision & unexpected experience, Peter was compelled  
to see that God's grace and purpose extended beyond his tradition ...  
... and that to be aligned with God, he had to change.

While the conversion of Cornelius is a critical part of this passage,  
it's far more significant as **the transformation of Peter**  
**that informed, pushed and moved the early Christian Church...**

... to spread beyond their assumed boundaries and limits  
of traditional definitions and understandings  
about who they were, as the people of God...

**... so the vision was really less about food than it was about people.**

When Peter shared the Good News with Cornelius' household,  
they believed, and were visibly filled with the Holy Spirit,  
just as the disciples themselves had been filled at Pentecost,  
**- except that these believers weren't even Jewish,**  
**and yet clearly God had called and chosen them.**

The earliest Christians were all of Jewish heritage  
and followed the rituals and traditions of Judaism.  
The early Christians assumed that a person had to become a Jew first,  
then become a Christian only within Jewish Law and community,  
and Christians should still follow & obey Jewish Law & ritual.

But the lesson here was, that by God's grace extends much further,  
because God's mercy and salvation are freely available to all,  
even to gentiles, who don't comply with the Jewish rituals.

What Peter had earlier rejected and declared profane,  
God had made clean, acceptable and even welcome in Jesus Christ,  
including gentiles, called by God to hope, healing & salvation.

This story is about **the theology of God's grace without limits**,  
which is at the very heart of God's healing-saving purpose & plan.  
It's about gracious love for the whole of human family,  
a picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who came  
to bring the lost, excluded & wounded sheep home.

It's important to recognize that it wasn't Peter  
who decided it was appropriate to bring gentiles into fellowship  
**but that he was catching up with what God was already doing.**

Peter was certainly not seeking or expecting a vision from God,  
that would change his life,  
alter the trajectory of the early Christian church,  
and get him in trouble with the leaders in Jerusalem.

To the Council it seemed like Peter was abandoning the faith,  
by his preaching the Gospel and baptizing gentiles...  
... for how could these gentiles, these outsiders  
possibly be accepted, loved and cherished by God?

Jewish leaders had always defined holiness and acceptance by God  
as being chosen, set-apart, separate and distinct  
from the non-Jewish pagan-world all around them.

The Council in Jerusalem demanded an answer and wanted to know  
how Peter could have so disregarded Jewish practice and tradition.

But Peter doesn't try to defend or explain himself,  
he simply described what happened, **what God had done**, vs. 15-17

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ...  
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?"**

And to their credit, once the Jerusalem leaders heard the whole story  
they accepted it as God's revealed will, truly **a God-thing**, vs. 18

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.'

And God's radical message to Peter and to the early Christians  
was that salvation, i.e. having a relationship with the Lord,  
was not about being Jewish or gentile, or religious law & ritual  
**but solely a matter of God's gracious love and invitation...**

**... and so the old categories were and are no longer in effect.**

As the Apostle Paul explains in *Galatians 3:28*,

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

The grace of God through Jesus Christ,

that is the decisive element of our salvation --- **and who we are,**

for both Jew and Gentile required **that same grace,**

**which is far more significant than anything we might do  
or any opinion, idea or viewpoint that we might hold.**

**Through Christ God has removed all the dividing fences between us,**

which reminds me of a WWII story that I read recently:

In France some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to a cemetery to have him buried. The priest asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic. The soldiers did not know. The priest sadly informed them that in that case, he could not permit burial in the church yard.

So the soldiers dug a grave just outside the cemetery fence. And they laid their comrade to rest. The next day the soldiers came back to add some flowers only to discover that the grave was nowhere to be found.

Bewildered, they were about to leave when the priest came up to speak to them. It seems that he could not sleep the night before, so troubled was he by his refusal to bury the soldier in the parish cemetery. So early in the morning he left his bed, and with his own hands, **he moved the fence** in order to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

The reality of God's love and grace includes all of humanity,

but in too many ways, we allow our differences to matter more

than the fact that we're **all created by God who loves us all ...**

**... and that none, no one is more loved or acceptable than any other.**

Sometimes we forget that grace is entirely God's gift to us,

it's all God's love, always unearned and entirely undeserved.

**God's gracious love brings us into God's family, the Church,**

**transformed together by grace, peace, joy, promise & hope...**

**... where we are all equally sinners who fail and fall,**

**and together being healed and saved by grace,**

called to walk together with our Lord as One...

**... to build a unified community brought together by grace and faith,**

**which is also, a glimpse at God's promise that's still in process.**

This is God's plan and purpose as it was described by Isaiah, vs. 6-8

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, ... And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud (or separation) that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, ... **for the Lord has spoken.**

This mountaintop feast of the very finest food described by Isaiah,

serves as a declaration of God's compassion & abundant provision,

a picture that attempts to describe

God's indescribable gracious love and mercy,

and God's blessings in abundance for **all people**,

far beyond anything that we might ever imagine.

Through the prophet Isaiah

God has provided a picture of what the Kingdom of God will be like,  
that Jesus came to initiate and put into process  
toward the fulfilment of God's promises & purpose.

**In Jesus Christ, by grace we become and are becoming new creatures.  
Not defined by our race, culture, status, income or anything else  
other than by grace and faith, by our shared unity in Christ ...  
... for by grace, we are all the beloved children of God...  
... in a relationship of grace, peace, promise, purpose, service and hope.**

God's invitation, God's love, it's broad, powerful and expansive.

The vision and the promise is that all are **equally & uniquely** loved  
and all are made worthy and acceptable by our Savior's sacrifice...

**...for we are each one in the still continuing process  
being made by God's grace members of the one body of Christ.**

**In the abstract and as a theological ideal, that seems easy enough.**

But in truth and reality, walls of separation and divisions  
are more familiar and comfortable, and a lot easier,  
than trying to live with diversity & difference **in unity.**

**That unity, however, does not mean uniformity, and does not deny  
or obliterate our distinctions, our differences and variances,  
but celebrates our uniqueness as God's gift toward mission,  
bound together and connected because, Jesus is our Lord.**

And this wasn't something that the early church leaders had planned,  
but it was entirely the work, the blessing and the purpose of God  
**reforming the followers of Jesus into the body of Christ.**

Now, of course we each one have an individual relationship with God,  
but a living and growing Christian faith involves community,  
**and to be Christian, is to be a part of Christ's body...**

**... for God uses diversity to strengthen and to increase our faith,  
and Christian spirituality necessarily involves other people.  
It means learning to work with them, and learning to love them.**

Indeed it is through our unity despite diversity and differences,  
that the Kingdom of God is most boldly and vividly revealed,  
where all are considered worthy, welcome and precious...

... for to reject fellowship and walk away because we disagree,  
is to place that disagreement **above the grace of God**  
which has called us to a Christian unity & harmony...

**... which is to follow the way and truth demonstrated by Jesus  
who welcomed sinners and outcasts with hope and hospitality.**

Christian discipleship according to God's will, desire and purpose  
means that we learn to live together **with our differences,**  
to love and respect even those with whom we disagree.

**Welcome and hospitality are not just an option for us as Christians,**  
but are the faithful path that Jesus has called us to walk,  
not as a guilt driven commandment or legalism,  
but as **an obedient response to God's own grace.**

This world can be a very cruel, harsh, divisive & demanding place,  
very quick to judge and condemn, to exclude, dislike and reject,  
to accuse and assign motives, and very hesitant to forgive.

In contrast,  
we are each called to reflect and dispense God's generous mercy,  
even when it's freely given to the most difficult & undeserving...

**... and surely the task of the Church of Jesus Christ is to be,**  
**and to live out an alternative perspective of hope & trust in God**  
**as a place of welcome, healing, mercy and limitless grace,**  
**and of letting God's grace flow freely through each of us.**

Grace can be a very difficult concept for us to accept and to live out.

- For some, hard to believe that God really loves them,  
despite all their flaws, the sin & wrong they've done.
  
- For others, hard to believe that God really loves them,  
and not because or influenced by all the good that they've done...  
... any more than we could boast or take any of the credit  
that a fireman carried us out from a burning building.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, **so that no one may boast.**