

John 13:30-35  
Acts 11:1-18  
May 2, 2010

### Pigs in a Blanket

You take a mini sausage or some people use mini hot dogs. You wrap them with one quarter of a raw crescent roll and you bake them in the oven according to the directions on the crescent roll package. Before too long you have an appetizer ready to serve your family or guests. Martha Stewart says pigs in a blanket are a Superbowl favorite. Some people dip them in mustard and others use ketchup or sweet and sour sauce. Some people pop the whole thing in their mouth and others consume in two or three bites.

If your hot dogs or your sausage have any pork in them, then it would be wise not to serve this appetizer to your Orthodox Jewish or your Islamic friends; they likely would politely decline or even take offense at the menu. Certain religions have dietary restrictions as a part of their beliefs. Mormons will not eat chocolate, drink coffee or coke because they contain caffeine. Hindus will not consume beef because of their reverence for cattle. Most Jews and Islamic folk do not eat pork.

Peter, who was the leader of the Christian Church in the years after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus was at prayer, at nap and in a trance in the city of Joppa in Israel and he had a vision of all kinds of animals being lowered from heaven on a sheet or blanket. These animals in his vision represented all the animals that Jews were not supposed to consume. Three times Peter heard God's voice urging him to kill and eat what was in the blanket; but Peter resisted. Peter resisted because never in his whole life had he violated Kosher custom. Peter resisted because he had been taught since he was a child not to eat pork and rattlesnake and bear. Peter resisted because this was a new teaching from God. He wakes up and the next thing you know Peter is invited to dinner by an officer in the Roman military, a non Jew.

This is the story of how the church changed. This is a story of who is in and who is out. This is a demonstration of who is welcome and who is not. Then as now people drew circles. Some were welcome in the circles and some not. Today In Arizona Hispanic American Citizens are anxious about a new law that requires immigrants to prove they are legal. Will they be confused with "illegals" and mistreated? Will the civil right of American Citizens be

violated? When I was in elementary and middle school I remember that there were certain cliques of kids to which I was not welcome. Sometimes that really hurt. I have younger friends who experience these hurts today. Being excluded is painful. Many Christian churches today refuse to welcome gays and lesbians, some attack them and very few ordain them. Many countries in the world today restrict or forbid the work of the church. Pakistan and India have grave mistrust for each other and one chief reason is that Pakistan is majority Islamic and India is majority Hindu. The world and yes even the church has always drawn circles. Some are in and some are out.

A few days after our special congregational meeting to elect Michelle Hwang as our Associate Pastor, I received an e-mail from a long time colleague and friend of mine who is chair of the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Baltimore and he was asking our Associate Pastor Search Team to fill out a diversity report. Search teams in the Presbyterian Church must develop criteria for the selection of pastors that are not discriminatory, that is, not based on racial ethnicity, age, sex, marital condition or disability. So after the search you need to certify how many female and racial ethnic candidates you interviewed. I had to laugh; we just called a Korean

American woman to be our Associate Pastor – hello – the last name in Hwang. Why in the world do you want us to fill out a diversity report? I sent a two paragraph tongue in cheek e-mail to Morton explaining to him that our team only considered Korean American Women between the ages of 30 and 45. He responded in kind, but all religiously correct rhetoric aside, the truth is that 50 years ago the likelihood of a mostly white protestant church calling an Asian American Woman as a pastor would have been near zero. Of course we wouldn't have been racist and of course we wouldn't have been sexist, we have nothing against Asians or women. We would simply have explained to Presbytery "that our congregation just isn't quite ready yet." Circles were smaller back then.

The Jews of the first century had table fellowship rules and Peter faced a conundrum. Not only was he supposed to avoid pigs in a blanket, but he was forbidden to eat with people who were non Jewish or ritually unclean. Even though he wasn't quite ready for change, Peter chose to accept the dinner invitation. Peter chose to break the rules because he felt God was calling him. It was a tough decision to go against the Bible; but Peter decided that the Spirit of God was urging him to defy Old Testament scripture so that non

Jews could become Christians. Peter and six Jewish Christians went to the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Over dinner, Peter taught about Jesus, he preached the Gospel and all these Romans, these gentiles, these goyim these non Jews were deeply touched. Together they had a profound and intense religious experience. Luke who wrote Acts says that the Holy Spirit fell upon them and Peter knew that they must be baptized.

This incident does not strike us as terribly extraordinary but Peter and Cornelius suddenly found themselves in new territory indeed. You see Peter a Jew baptized the first Gentile and Cornelius a Roman adopts the strange yet inviting new religion of a foreign land. This story is so important to the early church and so important to Luke that he tells it twice. The version we have read this morning is the second telling. The first version is in Acts chapter 10. Acts 11 is different in that it relates what happens to Peter when he returns to the Church's headquarters in Jerusalem. What happens is that he gets in trouble. "What do you mean you had dinner with gentiles you sinner?" "What do you mean that you had non Jews baptized in the name of Jesus?" "What the heck are you doing?" "Who gave you permission to go against the Bible?" Peter explains to the followers

of Jesus that he had a dream – pigs in a blanket – he heard the Spirit of God. “Who was I, he asks them – that I could hinder God?”

Peter explains his blanket dream and that God’s Holy Spirit led him in this direction. God is reaching out even to people who don’t keep the practice of Jewish table fellowship. God is overturning assumptions. God is stretching stereotypes. The whole church learns that God intends much more for this instrument called Baptism than any of them had ever imagined. Previously the church taught that gentile men had to be circumcised and convert to Judaism before they could be baptized in Jesus. Oh yah, that was a real popular evangelism technique. The church was secure in its understanding that Christianity was to be a reformation of and a child of Judaism, but God was shoving the church outward. God was drawing larger circles. The church was all warm and snug in the blanket of the Mother religion; Judaism. The “Jewishness” of Christianity was unquestioned, but now there was some sore of new fangled blanket approval; there were to be gentiles in the church as well.

In 1978 I was ordained as an elder in the Presbyterian Church by my home church on Long Island at age 19. I served on the Session for three years. if I was 19 years old in 1950, there is no way

I would have been elected elder. Only in the seventies did our denomination allow for the ordination of young adults, until that point our church practiced age discrimination. Even A 35 year old elder would be quite unusual. Going back 80, years there were no woman elders. Hey 200 years ago elders were old and men and elected for life - talk about adverse to change. Today our church is deeply blessed and greatly enriched by the gifts of ordained women and men of all ages.

What you witness in the Book of Acts is the amazing transformation of the church in its first century. First we were a tiny sect of Jews who lived within 40 miles of Jerusalem and believed that Jesus was the messiah. Then we became a sect of Judaism that stretched into Lebanon and Syria. Next we became a church that baptized gentiles and we had churches as faraway as Egypt and Turkey and in thirty years we had churches as far away as Morocco, Spain and India. The circle of Christianity became wider and wider and both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome.

The story of the book of Acts is the story of the church learning that all people are welcome in God's church and at God's table. The story of the Book of Acts and the story of the church is the story of

God's people being called by God to draw wider and wider circles. Peter went against scripture when he ate dinner with and baptized Cornelius but he also had been schooled at the feet of Jesus; and Jesus his rabbi shared dinner with tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes. The good Jews thought that kind of behavior was disgusting.

Things are interesting in the church today. Those of us who are Christians in North America and Europe think we know how it is done. Those of us who are Catholic Orthodox, Mainline and Evangelical Protestants think we got it all covered but the church of Christ is radically changing. Whether we like it or not The Pentecostals are the fastest growing arm of Christianity and the place the church is growing fastest is the Southern Hemisphere and Asia. Whether we like it or not most people don't care all that much about denominations they are looking for a welcoming church that helps them, their family and their friends truly connect with God. God keeps drawing larger circles.

100 years ago we did not ordain hardly any elder under age 50. 100 years ago we white North Americans ran the Protestant Christian church on every continent. 150 years ago Presbyterian elders owned

slaves. 100 years ago White European Catholics ran the Catholic Church on every continent. 55 years ago there were no ordained female ministers in the PCUSA. Today we are very sure that sexual purity laws written two thousand years ago exclude the possibility of the ordination of Gay and Lesbians.

As Christians we tend to get all snug and comfortable in our little blankets. We get used to our hymns, our church chair, our world view. We get in the groove or the rut of doing things the way they were done last week and soon our comfort morphs into rigidity. But God keeps drawing larger circles. God keeps welcoming the stranger. God keeps challenging exclusivity. God keeps presenting new visions and vision for the church. Pigs in a Blanket; Imagine that.

God is not done with us yet.