

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“See Something New”

Acts 11: 1-18

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Fred is dead on the floor. The only thing in the room with Fred is a bowl of water. How did Fred die? Don't tell if you know the answer. **Fred is dead on the floor. The only thing in the room with Fred is a bowl of water. How did Fred die?**

It's one of those little teasers I used to use with teenagers to pass the time between here and Colorado. And it seems simple enough but you wouldn't believe sometimes how long it would take and the line of questioning that kids would take in order to solve this little mystery.

Fred is dead on the floor. The only thing in the room with Fred is a bowl of water. How did Fred die? It could go on for hours and folks would just be pulling their hair out. I'd make them ask yes or no questions... that's all I would answer, “yes” or “no” and they would ask them mile after mile.

Trying to imagine some plot or drama...

Wondering if perhaps Fred had drunk bad water.

Was the water from Lake Waco?

That sort of thing.

Was it that simple, some accident? Or was Fred murdered? Was the mafia involved? A government conspiracy?

It would go on and on and eventually... finally after I broke down and begin to guide their questioning... they'd get it and the bus would erupt with a groan. Because... Fred's a fish. But it's hard to get to that, impossible really, when you start with the picture of Fred being a man who's 5'10" with brown hair and beady eyes. Once you have your picture of the way things “are” it's really difficult for reality to get in and show you how things really are.

Some of that Fred-is-dead-kind-of-conundrum was taking place in the early days of the Church and it gave rise to today's story from Acts.

Something had happened to Peter, and the Church was scratching its head and saying... **“There's just no way.”** Luke begins by letting us know that when word got out that Peter was associating with non-Jews, the circumcised believers called him in for a talking to.

Some translations say, **“The circumcision party,”** which does not sound like any party I'd ever want to be invited to. BYOS... bring your own scalpel. A **circumcision party** is an oxymoron.

What Luke meant to communicate was, the Jewish Christians... Jews who were followers of Jesus... too. In addition to... In other words, what Jesus had done and who Jesus was... was a kind of tweaking of Judaism... at that point. It was just another chapter in their story with Yahweh. Jesus was an additive to get Judaism up and running.

Meaning... lots of things have not changed really.

Pork is still pork

And unclean is still unclean

And gentiles are still out and not to be associated with.

So when they hear that their good buddy Simon... Leader of the new church, preacher of the gospel story... the Rock, Peter, was eating with gentiles... they just didn't get it... It's not like they were trying not to get it... It's more like a bunch of teenagers on the way to Colorado imagine that Fred is someone who looks like their dad.

All Freds are human...

All Gentiles are lost...

They are uncircumcised and unclean...

So... they stop their circumcision party long enough to send off a memo to Peter. **“Dear Simon... heard about your little dinner party at Caesarea... hurry home... must talk.”**

So... Peter went to Jerusalem and they **“criticized him,”** Luke says. **“You not only went into the house but you ate with them???? Are you stupid or something?”**

“Yeah... I know it’s crazy... but let me tell you what happened.” And Peter tells the story almost exactly like Luke lays it out in chapter ten. He wants them to know all the details, blow by prophetic blow.

First off... I was deep, deep in prayer and I had this vision... It was my first... I’d heard about these kinds of things... The Lord and I had talked about it but this was my first honest to God transcendent moment.

There was this... well... kind of like a bed sheet thingie being let down from heaven to where I was praying on the roof. And when it got close enough I could see it was full of all sorts of animals and I mean... all sorts, including the one’s that go oink.

So... I’m thinking, “Well, that’s really weird” when I hear a voice telling me to go ahead and have a barbeque with all of it.

I protested, of course. “The rules you gave us don’t allow for that kind of cuisine. Nothing unclean has ever touched these lips and never will.” And, fellas, it was the oddest thing. I’m thinking the voice is going to say, “Good for you, Simon, you passed the test” and instead I hear, “Don’t be calling anything I create unclean.”

And just so I wouldn’t doubt I’d had a vision... I saw the same thing happen three times... “Peter get up and eat... and don’t call my creation unclean.” Three times... it replayed in front of me.

Now... before we go on with this slightly creative retelling of Peter’s story, we might just pause and remember how shocking this might be. The dietary laws were given to them by God... and one would presume for a reason. It’s not like God was thinking... **“I just want to make things hard on my people and not let them drink certain milk or mix their grains... or enjoy fried catfish. I wish I’d never made catfish and don’t want them eating any.”** No....

Rules were there for a reason...

The law was always some gift...

It wasn’t just divine horseplay...

And Peter, in obedience to and love for Yahweh, had followed them. Never once had he violated even one of those rules... not one. And now God is saying, **“Oh... go right ahead... enjoy everything.”**

Peter can’t get that... He’s stunned... **“You mean to tell me I could have been enjoying pulled pork all this time?”** He’s just momentarily rocked back, I think... at the idea that what was once bad could be called good.

So... let’s just wonder with him about that... and take note... That what is blessing in one stage of faith becomes a burden in another. Got that? What is necessary at one level of faith will likely have to be transcended at another. Just let that sort of bounce around in you and see what the Spirit does with it.

Meanwhile, back on the roof....

Peter relates his story with great detail. Right then... right then... there were some gentile men there to see me and the Spirit said don’t be afraid of going with them. And I did and when I got to Cornelius’ house, he told me he’d had a vision too and that it was about me coming to see him and preaching to his whole household...

So I went to preachin’ and even before I got to the third point and corresponding poem, the Spirit fell on them... (Sound familiar, guys?)... and I remembered old John talking about how he would baptize with water and Jesus with Spirit... so I assumed this must be the Lord at work. I mean if he gave them the same gift he gave me... gave all of us, who was I to stand in the way. And afterwards how could I refuse their hospitality, to share a meal.

So for Peter it was like someone had said, **“Hey, Fred’s a fish.”** And in a moment he’d had a change in his capacity to see. It was an awakening... a raising of consciousness. It was a visionary shift.

And I’m thinking the folks could see it in his eyes... on his face... and they couldn’t object, it was Peter for goodness’ sake... and what else could they say but, **“Well how about that... God has granted salvation to the gentiles...”**

But... but... I don't think anyone at that moment went outside and took the "no gentiles welcome" sign off the door. They saw something... because Peter had... but it wasn't direct knowing yet. It was... Peter said so... but it wasn't theirs yet... So for a long time, the circumcision party was a pretty exclusive group. By invitation only...

Fred was still a person.

And truth is... Peter even struggled with this later. Galatians says that at one point he stopped eating with the Gentile Christians. He couldn't maintain this perspective. So... it's the Bible's way of saying, **"Change at this level is very hard... even if you're an apostle... even if you've had a vision from God... this is very difficult."**

And we know that in ourselves, and we've witnessed it in the church. There is this new reality... new creation... new kingdom... new ethic... **"You've heard it said..., but I say to you..."** And even those of us who have said yes and wow and amen know that living this newness is easier said than done. Even Peter couldn't do it. It's so hard and we keep seeing differences. Jew and Gentile, what scares us... what bothers us... what offends... we keep seeing it... we can't stop.

We're so limited. And it has to do with what it means to be human... To be human means we think in a certain way and our minds function in a certain way. I have a teacher friend who says we come with an operating system... and it's binary. What she means by that is that it knows what it knows by distinction and comparison. It's the way we think... In the small mind...

Things are this or that...

Better or worse...

Black or white.

Gentile and Jew... clean and unclean.

And, she says, we define everything this way including ourselves. You know who you are by comparison to everyone around you.

Not like her... more like him.

I'm in this group but not that one...

Have these characteristics, not those...

Believe this and not that...

And this isn't bad, per se, it's just the way we come out of the box. It's the system that came with the hard drive. And it gets nurtured in us...

Anyone watch Sesame Street lately? I used to watch it all the time... when our kids were little. They'd have left the room and Julie and I were still way into it. ... Loved Elmo. I was a Grover groupie. **"I super Grover will now preach a wonderful sermon from Acts."**

I digress... If you watch Sesame Street, you'll hear the small mind being taught. **"One of these things is not like the other, one of these things ...just doesn't belong."**

See, it's just the way we begin and probably a gift at one stage of the journey. It's what we have to work with as we start this journey in this beautiful but broken world... It's the operating system God gave us. This is this and that is that.

But... but if we're making a journey with God, one day a pop up comes up on the screen... And it's from the manufacturer... the one who made us, and it says... **"Hello, beloved... if you're tired of living this way... you can change... Would you like to download an upgrade?"**

And we can... not with the click of a button... but there is a new way of thinking ... a new being... a new mind, Paul would call it. And it no longer defines everything by comparison and judgment... that capacity hasn't been discarded but it somehow has been transcended. The old mind is limited and functions fine in the old world... But the Kingdom of God requires a new mind.

Jesus certainly functioned from that mind... and he speaks from it, though it's not always easy to understand. **"Blessed are the poor in Spirit..."** What's he saying? I'm not sure we can get it with the small mind.

Philip can't... in that gospel reading. Jesus is using this language of unity. **"I and the Father are one."** And Philip, from the small mind, keeps saying... **"Show us the Father... two can't be one... that doesn't work."**

"Philip... if you see me you see God."

"Okay, Lord... but could you show us the Father..."

"Umm... well... Let's try this... Fred is dead on the floor..." You see the trouble... getting Jesus... See the trouble in the Church seeing what's true... Living this radical grace where we stop seeing all the separation. Think for a moment. Admit for a moment your own running commentary about everyone who is in this room. Can you hear it? She's so _____ (fill in the blank). He tends to be _____.

All the saints who have tried to write about spiritual progress and stages say it doesn't have to be like that, and it finally ends in what they refer to as unity... It's a unitive stage... and we muggles on this side of transformation say, **"Uhgghh?"**

We taste it every now and then...

We see it some... especially if we keeping clicking the upgrade button.

God... taps us on the shoulder from beyond or deep within, and we say Wow!... Maybe in some moment of great quiet or great love or great beauty... great pain. And all our critique and comparison melts. You won't have to try. It will just be there...different seeing, "Oh, Fred's a fish."

That's what happened for John... he's exiled on Patmos... all alone, **"suffering,"** he says. Pain is so often a part of it.

And he writes that on the Lord's day, he was in the Spirit... I'd bet practicing some form of deep prayer. All the saints say that it's a nonnegotiable when it comes to accessing the new mind.

So... he's meditating. Maybe using the name of Jesus... and just saying the name of his teacher and friend softly over and over.

And his mind wandered back to home and those he missed... and he said... **"Jesus."**

And then he found himself drifting to his anger at those who had exiled him... and brought himself back to God's presence; he said it again, **"Jesus."**

He saw a seagull... and just started thinking about how funny seagulls looked... **"Jesus... Jesus.. Jesus..."** John was clicking the upgrade button... He says he was **"In the Spirit"** and God gave him a vision... Much longer and way more mysterious than Peter's, huh.

We read from the last page earlier... and what he sees is the eternal... and it's unitive, this new heaven and new earth. **"There is no more sea..."**

Nothing separating God's people from freedom...

Nothing separating weary wanderers from Promised Lands...

No more sea... no more exile from God... **"Look, God's dwelling place is among the people now."**

No sea... no exile from one another... we aren't separate in the eternal realm... everyone's gathered around one throne... one source. No more clean and unclean, us and them.

And no more gulf from ourselves... our True selves. There is nothing now to grieve, no mourning or tears... all things are new... all things are one.

"It's done," the Eternal echoes in John's vision. **"It's done."** This is reality... Alpha and Omega... beginning and end... All in All... every nation, every tribe, and every tongue. This is the eternal vision John saw.

And it is what we all saw in Jesus.

And it is the calling Jesus gave to the Church.

To DaySpring.

"Lord God Almighty... Creator of all that is... and everyone of us here now, lift us beyond our limitations so that we might see and love one another... And that we might see and love all your creation. Give us the capacity to live with both radical grace and radical holiness. Grant us grace here with one another and all the Saints that we might be all that we are, one. And we give glory to the Father, Son, and Spirit... As it was in the beginning... Is now and ever shall be... World without end... Amen... Amen."