



## **Sermon: 18 May 2025**

**Rev. Hugh Perry**

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

This section of Acts is significant because the early followers of Jesus saw 'the way' as a reform of Judaism and all their cultural conditioning would encourage them to keep it within Judaism.

'Luke', says William Barclay, 'sees this incident as a notable milestone on the road along which the Church was groping its way to the conception of a world for Christ'.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to be a strong group building practice to limit diet, dress or behaviour as a distinguishing mark that encourages our 'in-group', 'out-group' instincts. But the early church seems to have overcome that tendency even though later sections introduced new sanctions.

### **John 13: 31-35**

This passage begins immediately after Judas has left and is the beginning of Jesus' farewell speech which repeats the theme of love several times, intensifying the love commitment each time.

Raymond Brown writes that, as the disciples cannot follow Jesus, he gives them a command that, if obeyed, will keep the spirit of Jesus alive among them as they continue their life in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Brown goes on to say that love is more than a commandment; it is a gift, and like the other gifts of the Christian dispensation it comes from the Father through Jesus to those who believe in him. 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you' (John 15:9).

### **Sermon**

Two important customs are challenged and found wanting in our Acts reading, dietary probations and exclusivity. Without that challenge the church as we know it, in all its diversity would not exist. However, there is at least one much earlier command to be a

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles*, (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1976),p.

welcoming community in the book of Hebrew scripture where so many people who want a 'pure' church go for proof texts to exclude people.

In Leviticus 19: 33-34 it says:

*"When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."*

It doesn't say you shall round up the people you perceive to be different, load them into a military aircraft and dump them somewhere else. It doesn't say that will make your country great again. But such actions were carried out by a president who wants to make his nation more Christian than ever.

But he is not alone. Despite many very clear biblical instructions to love others, much of the church still sees itself as a special 'in-group' and not only strongly disassociates itself from other faiths, but many Christians also set themselves apart from good Christian people they also see as 'other'.

Of course, the 'in-group' 'out-group' is not just a church phenomenon. Most of us have been taught it at school, especially during sports. As a small boy I went to a private school, and we hated the public school up the road. Furthermore, the boarders hated us day-bugs.

What surprised me when we moved to Levin, and I went to a State School, there were nicer classrooms, better playgrounds and more friendly kids. But they still couldn't teach me to spell.

What I learned years later was that my best friend, and later the best man at our wedding, is gay. Of course he is still a good friend.

In-groups define themselves by those they exclude. Not only does it feel secure to be part of an in-group, but that security attracts others and so helps the in-group to grow. Therefore, it must be good for evangelism, and aren't we supposed to build up the church?

Or should Christians only choose professions that do good, like teachers or doctors. That idea is debunked by the man I know who gave up wanting to be a Catholic Priest and became an economist that regularly speaks out for social justice.

I still believe that reading Murry Laugesen's book about his life as a missionary doctor and the public health official who framed our anti-smoking legislation renewed my faith in the Presbyterian Church.

I needed that because my loyalty took a beating when the General Assembly banned gay people from leadership in the church.

As an elder I attended assembly after assembly, in an attempt to block that legislation, and I sometimes think I have an affinity for hopeless causes. And that illustrates the problem for all of us. It is easier to oppose evil than to do good. Furthermore, we can pick the evil we decide we will oppose! So, we can pick on a group that other people are likely to dislike as well.

That suits the in-group, out-group growth strategy because in-groups need others it despises to attract others to the group.

That, I believe, is why so many Christians today are anti-gay. A huge proportion of us are heterosexual. I have always been attracted to the opposite sex, but I have often wondered if anti-gay men need their maleness confirmed. Do such people work to deny gay and lesbian people their basic human rights in order to feel secure? As Christians they reinforce their feeling of rightness by finding a couple of proof texts that say they are on God's side or even better, protecting God from the evil of difference.

I still remember the picture of the notice outside the Gosford Anglican Church that reads 'Dear Christians some people are gay, get over it. Love God'.

But we should not just focus on one issue because from the beginning of time, people have been hostile to people who they see as different. One of the ironies of our colonial past is that a lot of foods and customs that have added to the rich experience of our life in Aotearoa, were brought here by groups we originally despised.

I remember a controversy caused by a talkback host making anti-Māori remarks. Raybon Kan was the media's go to person for a smart comment at the time. So he was asked how the Chinese Community would feel if such racist remarks had been directed at them. Kan's reply was that the talkback host would never eat fresh vegetables again.

Growing up in a market gardening area I suspect that is true.

However, I once challenged a Chinese friend for being racist and he agreed and said; "what's more, we hate each other." He then added that in Palmerston North they were all Joes, and he got on fine but if he went down to Levin, he would get beaten up. 'They were all Youngs and Kwoks there' he said. I knew that was true because I had friends in all those groups who were market gardeners and even my friend in Palmerston North had a vegetable shop next to his photography studio.

Protecting territory is a primal urge and I only have one stray cat visiting my place otherwise there is a howling match in the middle of the night and fur on the lawn in the morning.

But God expects us to grow from our primal urges and become the people we are called to be. Through these readings from Acts and John's Gospel, God in Christ, instructs us to abandon excluding people and to love one another.

Behind all the imagery of the Acts story is a very simple logic spelled out in verse nine.

'But a second time the voice answered from heaven. 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 11:9).

God created an interdependent world and called it good. So, what right have people got to define some foods as unclean, or much worse, some people beyond God's love and care.

Certainly, some people are allergic to some foods. I spent a good deal of my childhood covered in hives and am grateful to leave those allergies behind as I grew. At the time of writing my granddaughter was staying with us and she has celiac disease so for her, gluten intolerance is certainly not a fad.

But those realities are completely different to defining an in-group by what it refuses to eat. However, the call to love others means that, although the followers of Christ are not defined by dietary restrictions, we are still called to love those faith communities that do.

The moment we judge any group we risk setting ourselves up as an in-group.

We then intentionally or subconsciously seek to strengthen our group by what we oppose or exclude in others.

Although dietary rules were the subject of Peter's dream, the issue of exclusion in this episode goes further, and Peter's dream was the catalyst that allowed a far greater barrier to be broken down.

Jesus was a Jew and there is a fair argument that Jesus' mission began as a Jewish revival movement. Jesus' encounter with the woman of Syrophenician descent in Mark's Gospel, (Mark 7:24-30) with adaptations in other gospels, illustrates his Jewish tradition that excluded others from God's concern. That episode demonstrates Jesus learning from the dialogue with the woman and growing towards a more inclusive understanding of God. It is also interesting that the episode comes directly after Jesus' statement that evil comes from people's hearts, not from what they eat. The gospel writer even labours the point by writing; 'Thus he declared all foods clean' (Mark 7: 19).

That and the episode of Peter's dream opens the way for Paul's mission to the gentiles and the adoption of the resulting Christian Faith by Imperial Rome which, despite the unfortunate stumbles along the way, was very significant in moving the Jesus movement through the centuries to us. Furthermore, this is a significant time to recognise and pray for our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers.

In that same spirit of ecumenism, we can note that Methodist Scholar Bill Loader helps us move on and tie the two readings together. He concludes his commentary on this morning's John reading by suggesting that oneness in love is the language of intimacy. This language of intimacy applies to our relationship with God and Christ and their relationship to each other. Significantly, he also writes that love encompasses evangelism and encompasses the challenge of being a Christian community.

The command to love is even more connecting because verse thirty-five states 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples' (John 13:35).

Furthermore, in chapter seventeen, which is a continuation of this farewell speech, Jesus talks about the unity between God and Christ along with the connection to all believers. Jesus explains that this loving unity is so 'that the world may believe' (John 17:21).

This is not, Loader writes, about propaganda or strategic techniques, but about being real caring communities.

Our commitment to Christ is a loving commitment to the world around us. We cannot define our rightness by the wrongness of others. We are not Godly people by who we keep away from, who we exclude from our church or exclude from our neighbourhood or even deport people we fear from our nation. Neither can we avoid the challenge of self-reflection and doubt. We are a Godly people by who we welcome, and some people are hard to welcome.

Perhaps we need a sign that says; 'Dear Christians, some people are different, some people live differently, that's the plan, so get over it and get with it. Love God.'

That's the message of our readings this morning and that is the message we must live into reality in our day to day lives.

The gift of diversity is a gift of growth as we learn from each other and that is the way we become the people Christ is calling us to be.