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Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148

PSALM 148

Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.
He established them for ever and ever;
he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and women alike,
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD!

ACTS 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵"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. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The 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. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If 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?" ¹⁸When 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."

SERMON

There have been a lot of stories worth listening to in the news, on twitter, and floating out there in the ether this last week. And a lot of them are hard to hear, because the restrictive abortion bans in Alabama and Georgia and Missouri and other states have forced women and families into a position of telling their stories, so that those of us who haven't faced that medical decision might have a little compassion.

Did you know that 1 in 4 women in the United States have terminated a pregnancy? That's a high percentage, and likely includes some of the women in this room, and certainly some of the women you know if your own life. And some of those women have been brave enough and kind enough to tell us their stories this week, and they are as vast and varied as the families telling them.

I am grateful this hasn't been a decision I've ever faced. Not because I'm so smart or so much better at family planning or anything else, but simply by sheer dumb luck that my body did what I wanted it to do when I wanted it to do it. But not so for one of my closest friends. After years of trying she got pregnant, somewhat miraculously. But at the 20 week ultrasound everything went pear shaped, and termination became a vocabulary word we

both started to use. It was heartbreaking, and still one of the most beautiful moments of my ministry, what an honor to offer a blessing for her little, beloved son before I traded places in the center of that sonogram suite with the physician and she and her husband said goodbye.

There are also the stories of women with perfectly healthy pregnancies that came at the wrong time. When they were too young, too poor, too unstable, or in other ways simply not ready for a child. And that is and was their prerogative. The Presbyterian Church supports their right to choose, just as we also call on the church to be a community which loves and supports one another well enough to carry each other through difficult seasons, whether they end in birth, adoption, a struggle to parent, or a termination.

Or, if these stories weren't your bag this week, you could check out the Sunday Magazine in the New York Times. There's a beautiful story I've posted on my facebook page about the role of pediatric hospice and respite homes. It's a hard story, because none of us like to talk about the death of children, but it's important. And the families in the story are so brave. The text is accompanied by these beautiful photos of children and siblings and parents, living their last days together, and every picture carries the name of the child.

Stories are gifts. They are invitations into the thoughts, beliefs, and worlds that other people live in. They give us these intimate and gracious windows to peer into spaces we don't inhabit, to learn something we otherwise would not know. To allow our own hearts and minds to be softened and shaped by experiences we will never have.

Storytelling in general is a big reason I'm a preacher. I'm not really one for the classic, three-point Calvinistic sermon. I would much rather view scripture as a story to be woven into the fabric of the stories we're all living. I like the idea that our money can tell a story. I love to listen to podcasts and radio programs while driving or cooking or cleaning, because they're full of good stories. Being a preacher is pretty great, because I get to live in the world of stories. I think there are few better repositories of stories than the Bible and the lives we are living every day.

And storytelling, it seems, is part of what made Peter such a convincing preacher and rhetorician. Now, more often than not, when this story is preached, we sort of gloss over the context and go right to all the animals on the bed sheet. And that's important, right? I love the message that God welcomes all people into the community, and I'm a huge fan of the idea that we can eat pork. However, for today, I'd like to focus on the how of this story...not the why. How does Peter go about telling this story?

In our text for today, Peter has been called on the carpet, so to speak. The council in Jerusalem is ticked off at him, and now he needs to account for his actions. See, one of the major conflicts of the early church was this question of who salvation was intended for—was it for all people, Gentile and Jewish alike? Or was salvation just for the Jews? Lots of the quibbles in the book of Acts center on this question. And so the circumcised believers, by which we understand to mean, the good, rule following Jewish believers, they call Peter before the council with this concern about a recent meeting Peter has taken with a

Centurion and his household. This Centurion wasn't a Jew, he was a Gentile, and we come to find out that Peter not only went into his home, but ate with him and enjoyed the hospitality of his decidedly non-kosher table.

Peter's in trouble, called before the council, and I think my first response would be to be a bit more lawyerly about this—to lay out, in a neat and orderly fashion, the validity of my argument, point by point. But that's not what Peter does. Instead, he begins to tell a story. He's not laying down a systematic theological argument or unwinding their concerns with logic, instead it's almost a travel log of sorts. Peter tells them all about the revelation, the religious experience he had while praying, a vision of kosher and non-kosher animals mingling together, and God's surprising command that Peter should eat all of them, without regard for dietary rules. He tells them how the Spirit compelled him to go and meet this centurion, and how the Centurion was expecting him. He shares the details of how the whole household was moved by the story of Christ, and how they came to faith by this unexpected interaction, initiated by the Spirit of God. And when Peter's done with his story, the council, scripture says, was stunned into silence. But, that's not entirely accurate. Their criticisms and concerns were silenced, but then they begin to rejoice and praise God, in the telling of Peter's vision and story they've had a change of heart, and now they are celebrating the word of God, given for all the people of God, Jew and Gentile alike. Their hearts and minds were moved and changed, not by an argument, but by a story—of Peter's religious experience, a vision from God, and a meal with this family.

And doesn't that ring true for you, in some way? Think back on times when your mind has been changed or shifted in one direction or another. What moved you? Was it simply a great pro-con list? Or was something deeper involved? When thinking about welcoming new kinds of people in the church, whether we're talking about members of the lgbt community, or people who might come from a different racial or cultural background, or even, I might add, welcoming women into the pulpit. It's almost never the argument alone that changes hearts and minds, it's the people. It's the stories. It's the work of getting to know one another as real humans, and not just as caricatures.

Right now, one of the biggest places I'm working on this in the life of our church is in the language of our hymns and prayers. I'm pretty good about gender inclusive language when it comes to women, right? Like, we say "humankind" not "mankind." And "Brothers and Sisters" not just "brethren." But I was affected recently by the challenge of a colleague of mine who does not define themselves as either male or female, they use "they/them/their" pronouns, and when I said "brothers and sisters," they didn't hear themselves in that language. And they told me so, and told me their story, and because I know them and care for them, it's causing a shift in my own work and thinking. Slowly working to change my language once again. Not "brothers and sisters" but "children of God" or "beloved family." Words that include.

The same goes for language which conveys ableism, which is a massive blindspot I'm working on. Do you know how many of our hymns use language of blindness? Or lameness? Or being struck dumb or deaf? And how all those metaphors are used as marks of being sinful or lacking the vision to see God's goodness? A lot! A lot of our hymns use

this metaphor, and it's only recently, after 30+ years of singing them, that my friend with a son with cerebral palsy pointed out to me how much that language hurts them. Because their son isn't sinful or evil. Another dear friend of mine has severe hearing loss, although she isn't fully deaf. And she's told me, too, not just that this language is hurtful, but that it implies there's something she should change about herself, and she doesn't think she would want to. Because being hard of hearing makes her who she is, and it's a part of her being, and she is wonderfully and fearfully created, just like anyone else.

This is hard for us. Because we church people are creatures of habit, right? I like my service at the hour it's always been, I want the same song sung first thing on Easter morning, I want my bulletin printed on the usual size paper. But what happens when new people bring with them new ideas, new needs, new perspectives, new stories? Well, if we take Peter's story to heart: we need to let our stories change one another. It's a reciprocal action, not a one way thing. The Gentiles may convert, but our practice will be changed by their presence.

And although change is difficult, it really, truly is, isn't this also a beautiful and hopeful idea? Diversity in our communities and our churches is so important, and not for some trivial idea of tokenism, but because we are all enriched in the giving and receiving of stories. In allowing our own hearts and minds to be changed by the life and needs and experiences of others, and allowing others the privilege of hearing who we are, where we come from, and how their life may be changed in the hearing of our stories.

So, my challenge to you this week is to go out and seek a new story. Get to know someone new...maybe in person, maybe in a book, maybe in scripture or on the radio. Find a story and really listen to it. Don't just listen for some tidbit that might be relevant to you, that might change your mind. Really listen to the whole thing, simply because it's a story worth your attention and honor. And then, once you've listened, then ask yourself that good, hard, beautiful question: what does it look like for our own communities and our own hearts to be changed in the giving and receiving of new stories? To become more fully reflective of the variety and uniqueness found in God's full creation, to become, ever more, the body of Christ we are called to be.