

## God's Love Overcomes Tribalism

Acts 11:1-18

May 18, 2025 (Eas. 5-C)

St. Paul's Lutheran, North Freedom

*The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."*

*Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'*

*"I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'*

*"The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.*

*"Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'*

*"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"*

*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." (Acts 11:1-8 NIV84)*

Dear friends, fellow believers in Jesus Christ, our risen Savior:

"Tribalism" is a word that's been in recent news commentary. It means that individuals in a group, those who belong to the "tribe," prioritize their interests over the interests of others. Soon they look at other groups as being inferior, or the enemy. It's called an "Us versus Them" mentality. It's become quite common in America. For instance, those who hold to critical race theory and the 1619 Project look down on those who disagree with them as racists. In another "tribe," white nationalists claim the superiority of whites over other races. Then you have political tribes, die hard MAGAs versus left-wing progressives, red states over against blue states, their differences fanned into flame by the media.

Our text for today describes an attitude of tribalism in the days of the early Christian Church. But it also shows us how **God's Love Overcomes Tribalism**.

For about two or three years after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Christian Church expanded through Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. But the believers only evangelized the Jews, the people of their "tribe," so to speak. Then one day the church heard that Simon Peter, one of the apostles, had gone to a Gentile's home and spoke the Word of God to him and his household. In Jerusalem, the "circumcised believers"—that is, those who insisted that a man needed to be circumcised and follow the Old Testament laws and customs—criticized Peter, telling him, "*You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.*" In their view, he wasn't supposed to do that, it was forbidden.

Peter originally had the same thought. But he described for them a vision from God that made him rethink this. In this vision he saw a sheet from heaven coming down to him with all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles and birds, including pigs and rabbits and other "unclean" animals that were

forbidden for Jews to eat. So when Peter heard a voice telling him, “*Get up, Peter. Kill and eat*”, he was taken aback. “Why, Lord, I’ve never eaten anything unclean in my life!” But the Lord’s voice told Peter, “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*”

The vision prepared Peter for what came next: Visitors from a Gentile, a Roman captain named Cornelius, who wanted Peter to come and bring the message of salvation. “Go to an uncircumcised man’s house?” But now Peter understood that this was God’s will; God’s love breaks down barriers.

Now, the Lord had commanded the Israelites of the Old Testament to hold to circumcision laws and ceremonial laws like not eating unclean foods and having their Sabbath on Saturday. Those laws served as a hedge or a wall around the Jewish nation to keep them distinct from the Gentiles; St. Paul wrote that “the law was our guardian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian” (Gal. 3:24,25). Christ has removed the barrier wall between Jews and Gentiles. Paul wrote shortly afterwards, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” If we start insisting on our customs and have an attitude of tribalism, we’re erecting walls that Christ has removed. Worse still, we’re giving the impression that in order to be a true Christian, you need to be like us—you need to have the liturgy, all the symbols, and so forth. Christian customs can be useful, but they are not commanded by God. That’s not what saves us. Christ alone, his work on the cross, saves us.

And his work is meant for all people. Peter witnessed how he saw the Spirit at work when he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to a house filled with Gentiles. “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.” Peter shared with them the message of Jesus Christ, how God anointed him with the Spirit, how Jesus was killed by being hung on a tree, and how God raised him from the dead. The Holy Spirit came on them all.

Peter remembered what Jesus had told them before he ascended: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” There it was happening before Peter’s very eyes. Since they had the gift of the Holy Spirit, and were brought to faith, Peter went ahead and baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism is also a means of grace that the Holy Spirit uses to bring little children to faith and confirm older ones in their faith. St. Paul again wrote that there is “one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God” (Eph. 4:4,5). The Spirit’s gift is for all, regardless of tribal divisions.

Might we in the WELS be accused of tribalism? Some may point to our fellowship practices, like not offering communion to those outside our faith, and say, “That’s tribalism! You’re looking down on others and you think you’re so superior!” We have good reason not to join in fellowship with those who have false teachings; the Bible tells us to “keep away from them” (Ro. 16:17). But we are to do this in the spirit of love. We’re to remember that we’re just as sinful and in need of a Savior as anybody else. We also remember that the Holy Spirit’s gift is for all, and also in other churches, wherever the gospel is proclaimed and baptism is applied, God’s love is bringing believers too. Think of how it’s going to be on the Last Day. When we enter heaven, we will see what John was privileged to see in Revelation: “There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). So maybe we still have our “tribes” here on earth. In heaven those differences will be taken away. Let’s work with the Word and let the Holy Spirit do his work here on earth. Trust that God’s love will overcome tribalism today. Amen.