

Sermon – *In the Footsteps of the Apostles – Peter*

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Athelstone Uniting Church #66

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Text: Acts 11:1-18 [NIV]

It has been an exciting weekend.. sports, Eurovision and a Federal Election – with our space here being used as a polling place. I hear there were 900 or so people who walked through those doors yesterday!

And.. as well as the privilege of being able to vote in our safe country, we were able to reward ourselves with both an 'I Voted' biscuit made and designed by Victoria - and a democracy sausage – along with the essentials of white bread, cooked onions and tomato sauce! It has become a thing – people complain now if there are no sausage sizzles at polling places! And what a great opportunity to raise funds and connect with the community!

Did you know that there is a democracy website that you can sign your sausage sizzle up on? And Jeff was telling me that there was another vote – where school children chose their favourite sausage made by Slapes – chicken parmi! And Slapes sold 21,000 of these 'democracy sausages'!

Now sausages have been controversial from the early days when rebellious Christians broke all the rules and cooked sausages – which had a part in bringing on The Reformation – to today, when putting onions under or over the sausage can cause outrage!

And then, not sausages but meat.. do you remember Lady Gaga's meat dress that she wore for the MTV awards – a dress, with matching accessories – all made from raw beef - to make a point to stand up for what we believe in.

Well, food can be controversial! But ..I'm getting ahead of myself

... I'll come back to food later.

Let's pray...

Risen Lord Jesus

Draw near.. as we lean into you..

Open our eyes to see

Open our ears to hear

your Word to us this morning. Amen.

Shoes

We are now in the season after Easter, and the resurrection of Jesus, following in the footsteps of his apostles and their travels.

Each week we are looking closely into the story of one or two of the apostles. The shoes indicate the footsteps.

Peter

Today we heard about Peter – the one who raised Tabitha from death in last week's reading....

What do we know about him?

This is the same Peter who was the most prominent disciple of Jesus. His name was Simon or Simeon and sometimes Son of Jonah or Son of John. Jesus nicknamed him Peter – the Rock – which is the name Paul used for Peter.

Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee – the brothers left their job and their family behind to follow Jesus and become part of the 12 disciples.

After Jesus' resurrection, Peter became an apostle and leader of the church, known for his powerful preaching and miraculous powers, in Jesus' name.

This came about through Jesus' commission and the Holy Spirit's work through him.

He was quite an impulsive guy known to act before thinking – once he lopped off a guard's ear – do you remember that story?

He had his flaws, yet he had an amazing ministry – a great disciple for us to model ourselves on – for the way God can work through any of us, no matter our flaws, if we are willing, and in God's grace.

So you might remember that last week's reading ended with Peter spending some time visiting Simon the tanner in Joppa.

Well, while he was there, he spent some time praying up on the roof, and he had this vision: which we heard described in our reading – he saw a large sheet lowered down from heaven with unclean animals, reptiles, and birds in it, and is ordered to kill and eat them.

Peter was initially puzzled by this because it went against all he understood about food - but then it helped him realise how God is impartial and how his attitude to purity laws regarding food and Gentiles needed to be changed.

All of creation and all peoples are clean and pure because of God's grace.

So then he is invited to visit Cornelius – an 'upright and God-fearing centurion' in Caesarea. being a Gentile Peter should have declined if he was going to follow the purity code set out in the Law. But he accepts the invitation. He is welcomed with great honour by Cornelius, who calls together his whole household to hear Peter talk about Jesus. Realising what he had learned about God's love for all people, Peter tells him all about Jesus, all that he had witnessed about Jesus' teaching and of his death and resurrection. And as he testifies about Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and those with him and then Peter baptised them.

But then, we come to our reading today – and how he was criticised for eating with these people – the Gentiles.

Food can be controversial

The Jews stuck with particular codes about what they could and couldn't eat. Not only that, they could not gather at the table with people who did not follow their practices – these people were seen as unclean – and would make them unclean by their presence – affecting not just individuals but the whole community.

Peter, who had always followed the appropriate law regarding food had put that aside to accept the hospitality of Cornelius and his family of Gentile believers.

God through this vision, had opened a new way for grace to be shown. This was a marker for the good news to spread beyond the Jews, to Gentiles and to all peoples. Paul picked up on this vision too.

But when Peter went up to Jerusalem, there were complaints.

And that brings me back to the controversies around food –

I mentioned the meat dress that Lady Gaga wore to an award ceremony 9 years ago. She sat next to Ellen Degeneres – who was known to be a vegan.

An honouring of meat alongside a rejection of eating eat! What a controversy!

For a vegan to have to sit next to a meat dress, would not only be offensive, but it would have such a strong odour for someone not used to meat.

Yet Ellen was gracious and commented that it was probably not much different to someone wearing a leather outfit.

Today, we have so many different practices around the food we eat and how and when we eat it.

Practices relating to health, allergies, intolerances, ethics, religion and personal preference

Vegetarian Vegan fruitarian breatharian

Avoidance of particular meats

and particular methods of food handling

And there is gluten free, lactose free, nightshade vegetable free, preservative free, low sugar, and so on.

Then there are certain times when people will fast from certain foods or all foods. Many Christians fast during Lent in different ways, with many only eating fish on Good Friday. Moslems are currently observing Ramadan when they must fast from all food and drink during daylight hours.

Then, those who travel, will tell stories of the weird and wonderful foods they have sampled. I was talking this week to someone who ate deep fried scorpions – crunchy!

This same person calls himself a flexitarian – he chooses to be vegan because of his values of doing no harm – but if he sees that food is going to go to waste, he'd rather eat it – if edible – than see it go the bin. And he was saying that there are a few things he is considering trying –

he wonders about fresh roadkill – cooking up a kangaroo tail – or dumpster diving – have you heard of that? Where you go, under cover of darkness, through those big dumpsters at the back of restaurants and shopping centres and hunt for food that has been disposed of – that is still edible. I respect his thinking – but I personally wouldn't have the courage to try it!

Food is one of the most essential elements to sustain life. Food is central to so many biblical stories. Food is central to our daily lives.

Food as a symbol: like milk and honey can represent fruitfulness of the land

Jesus spoke about food in his parables – such as bread and salt

And then there is the central aspect of the significance of food when people gathered to share a meal – sometimes described as breaking bread together – a vital way to build community. And when people met to share food, they had certain practices they observed. We still do!

It's interesting how table fellowship to strangers is modelled through the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah to the three strangers in Genesis 18 – an elaborate feast of cakes, and a roasted calf, curds and milk

And Jesus showed radical hospitality when he fed a crowd of 5000 by multiplying a small amount of bread and fish to feed everyone with lots of leftovers.

But then food also played and plays a part on forming identity – through the purity laws of clean and unclean food. People were in or out of the community depending on whether the food is considered clean or not.

Peter and then later, Paul, needed to address how these laws were creating divisions between believers – and needed to be re-vised. By relaxing the food laws they could bring together Jews and Gentiles for social interaction and for sharing the good news.

Through Peter's vision, God provided an opening for a new way of being. Where diverse groups could come together – not divided by their food handling issues – but united in their love for God and one another.

This followed in the footsteps of Jesus – who was frequently described as eating with people who were considered by society to be sinners and outcasts – Jesus broke down social boundaries.

This change in attitude toward food created a new religious identity in which believers from all walks of life could and still do gather to eat together – eating the Lord's Supper.

All are made welcome at the table.

And it was God through the Spirit who opened this new way of being in community with one another.

It's in the context of community and hospitality that Peter was able to share the good news with Cornelius and his household – and it was into this environment that the Holy Spirit came.

When Peter explained all this to those who had been complaining, they had no further objection, and praised God acknowledging that God has granted a chance for a new life even to those they did not expect.

Food is a wonderful symbol of grace and when shared respectfully and graciously can help build community around the table.

The simple act of selling democracy sausages yesterday provided opportunity for those brief chats, the eye contact, they first steps towards relationship

And for people for the neighbourhood to renew past acquaintances

Provision of food other than meat - yummy quality biscuits and cake, along with gluten free goodies helped to open dialogue and perhaps helped people feel they had made connections. Maybe for some it will help them feel one step closer to joining us in some way.

So let's pray for the connections made yesterday – no matter how small – that they will grow fruit as we seek to share God's love with all people

Shoes

As I close, I invite you to look down at your shoes.

Where are your feet going to take you this week?

What dining tables, or café tables, or coffee tables will they slide under this week?

Whose hospitality will you accept

or who will you offer hospitality to in some way?

As disciples of Jesus, may you be aware of God's grace being present in your sharing of food and conversation wherever you find yourself.

May you be aware that God is already at work in the people you interact with, calling them by name

And may the Holy Spirit bless your eating and your interactions.

And may God delight in whatever may come next. Amen

There's a song we have been singing – one that encompasses much of what today's message is all about...

Let's sing: For Everyone Born

Bibliography

The new interpreters dictionary of the bible. Volumes 2 (D-H) and 4 (Me-R)