

What God Has Made Clean

Acts 11:1-18

THE PURPOSE OF LEVITICUS (AND THE LAW)

Our Bible study group has just spent the last two months studying the book of Leviticus. I don't think you could get one of us to say that it is our favorite book of the Bible. It is full of do's and don'ts, of blood sacrifices and burnt offerings, and it discusses subjects we normally don't talk about with *anybody* much less members of our church family. Above all, it doesn't seem like much of it applies to what we're going through right now – so why study it? One of the reasons I think studying Leviticus is valuable is because it helps us get into the minds of people who put these rules and regulations into practice – including Jesus and his disciples.

When we read the stories of the First (Old) Testament we think of the Israelites as one united people either camped in the wilderness or living in the Promised Land. By the time of Jesus, however, the Israelites had been conquered by and scattered throughout the Roman Empire. This wasn't the first time they had been overthrown and tossed, either. The Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE and took ten tribes its people into captivity. The land that remained became known as Samaria by the time of Jesus. The remaining two tribes of Israelites lived in Judah – the Southern Kingdom of Israel – for another hundred years or so before they were conquered by the Babylonians. The Babylonians laid waste to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple before taking many of the remaining Israelites into Babylon. This period of Israelite history is known as the Babylonian Exile, or simply the Exile, when the people of Judah lived among Gentile pagans who worshipped idols and ate the meat from animals sacrificed to false gods. Rather than becoming absorbed into this culture, the Israelites remained distinct by upholding the practices of their faith that remained possible for them. The house of God had been looted and torn down, so the way they were able to honor God was to follow the laws of daily living which guided what they ate, when they rested, how they dealt with disease, and who they married, among other things. It was during this time of Exile that the Torah – the first five books of the Bible, including Leviticus – was written. Is it any wonder that so much of it was dedicated to the behaviors that distinguished the Israelites from the Gentiles? Not only this, but the Torah coupled the laws with the punishments that would befall those who did not obey. Unsurprisingly, one of the worst punishments was exile.

By the time of Jesus, 500 years later, the Israelites lived under yet another foreign power, and the practices outlined in Leviticus were firmly entrenched. Following the law of Moses was the primary way the Israelites worshipped and honored God. To loosen the guidelines was to risk losing God and returning to exile. Remaining distinct from the Gentiles was the way they remained the People of God.

SCRIPTURE

This week's scripture refers directly to the dietary laws described in Leviticus. These laws were the most difficult to uphold during the Israelites' time among the pagans since most of the meat that was available had been sacrificed to false gods. By the time this week's scripture was written, eating foods referred to as "unclean" in Leviticus was horrifying to the people of Israel. These are the words of Acts, chapter 11, verses 1-18:

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

REPETITION

Beyond sharing a concern about eating forbidden foods, this scripture has another thing in common with Leviticus – another thing that makes Leviticus difficult to love. Leviticus is repetitive. In many cases, we first read the words God speaks to Moses and then we

hear Moses speak those same words to the people. If you only read this week's scripture in Acts, you won't know that this is the second time this story appears. First, we read of it happening to Peter and then we read Peter telling it to a group of appalled Jewish Jesus followers.

One of the lessons I learned when I was doing chaplaincy work in seminary was that when a person I was pastoring repeated the same story more than once, I should pay attention. There was a reason the person needed to tell it. Repetition in scripture is also important. In Leviticus repetition reflects the urgency of its instruction. It was thought that if the Israelites studying the scripture didn't understand and follow the law, God would punish them, and exile from God and the community would be the least of it. It's like teaching a child to stay out of the street. The lesson "look both ways" was *drilled* into my head until it was more than a habit because it would only take one time of me forgetting to look to get me killed. In the same way, the repetition of Leviticus preserved the life of the people of God.

Peter's vision was a lesson repeated three times. Three times a sheet holding animals that the law forbade him to eat was lowered from heaven before him. Three times a voice told him to kill and eat. Three times Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." And three times the voice replied, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This repetition prepared Peter for what happened next, and he was able to recognize the gentile Cornelius as a fellow child of God. Not only this, but it also opened up the possibility of true relationship between Peter and gentile Jesus followers. Until this time, Gentiles were accepted as full members of this community only when they had first converted to Judaism. When Peter went to Cornelius and his household, his mind was open to the possibility that this was not a requirement of God. Peter told them that because he had seen his vision, he set aside the practice of not associating with Gentiles and accepted them as God had accepted them. This development continued as Peter spoke to them of the gospel, because before he could even finish his sermon, the Holy Spirit filled the group. After that, they were family, and staying with them for a few days was only natural.

This week's scripture introduces Jewish Jesus followers who hadn't had this experience, and when they heard Peter had stayed with Gentiles and eaten with them, they were scandalized. It took Peter's witness, his retelling of how God accepted the Gentiles and brought them life with the Holy Spirit, for the Jewish Jesus followers to also accept them. It wasn't Peter's acceptance, it was God's acceptance that gave the Jewish Jesus followers the ability to recognize them as recipients of the life God offers.

LAW AND REPETITION

Even though we're living 2,000 years after the events of this week's scripture, we can identify with the Jewish Jesus followers and Peter before his revelation. We shy away from accepting the call of God if it doesn't match our current beliefs about what is acceptable. We can also be appalled by the faithful practices of others who are different than we are. For example, my former mother-in-law, who is Catholic, was horrified when my husband and I didn't have our daughter baptized as an infant. For me, my eyes cross when I hear of a denomination that doesn't ordain women. Unfortunately, these differences and our attitudes – and others like them – dilute the power of God.

Secondly, like Peter, we also need to have the God's lessons repeated to us again and again to change our beliefs and behavior – especially when they make us uncomfortable. How easy is it for us to overcome the tradition of competition between congregations and denominations? To work together, we must let go of measuring our "success" by how many members we have or how tall our steeple is. To truly succeed, we must let go of the things that divide believers from one another and instead work together to do what matters – build the Realm of God.