

Dreaming in Joppa: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148

by [Jon Walton](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

Many Christians can name the hour and the place of their salvation. For me it was answering not one but two altar calls at Billy Graham crusades in the 1960s. For Reinhold Niebuhr, who was asked if he could name the time and place of his salvation, it was “2,000 years ago on a dusty hill named Golgotha outside Jerusalem’s wall.”

In the spirit of Niebuhr’s calculation, perhaps we can say that Acts 11:1-18 also qualifies as one of those timeless and defining moments in human salvation that is determinative in every Christian’s life. What is described in Acts is the move from sectarian Judaism to a faith that is open to all of us whose lineage is not Jewish but gentile. We have the drive and movement of the Holy Spirit to thank for this.

Luke is careful in telling the story to build the case, piece by piece, for Peter’s new perspective on the most important questions for the new church. To whom is the gospel to be preached? How wide is God’s embrace? A controversy had erupted in Judea when apostles and believers, good Christian Jews, heard that gentiles were being converted to the faith. This was hardly good news to people who were the bearers of a messianic expectation and a code of laws that nurtured and defined their separation from the uncircumcised and the unclean. Admitting gentiles into the synagogue seemed like inviting foxes into the henhouse, and unclean foxes at that.

But Peter had had a dream when he was in Joppa, and he witnessed to that dream: he was convinced that the gospel was to be taken to gentiles, and he insisted that nothing and no other creature or person should be considered unclean. At first the faithful in Jerusalem must have thought he was crazed, but by the end of his explanation they were amazed at what God had revealed to and through him. They were so impressed that they praised God, saying, “Then God has given to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

If Golgotha was the day of reckoning for our salvation, then the day that Peter dreamed of innumerable unclean creatures made clean in God’s estimation was the day salvation actually came to our house, to you and to me. Before that moment,

Christianity was not available to those who were not born and ritually inducted into Judaism. But ever since the early church was opened to gentiles, Christians have struggled to be as open in other times and places, and as willing to embrace those we thought were unclean but whom God has declared clean.

Christians have always struggled with two images that describe the church: is the church the Virgin Mother, pure, unsullied and unstained? Or is she an Earth Mother gathering her wayward children to her skirts? In the church of the Virgin, no eye is pure enough to see God, no tongue clean enough to speak God's name. This church is vigilant in covering her children's ears and tries to keep them from seeing or touching the world's impurity. Its clergy are a model to the flock in morality, goodness and self-control.

In the church of the Earth Mother, however, the dirty hands and unwashed faces of her children are a delight. "I am come that you might have life," Jesus said, "and that you might have it abundantly." This church's children gather to her like Ma Kettle's kids come in from the barnyard, frogs in their pockets and grass stains on their jeans. What they lack in cleanliness they more than make up in joy. Her clergy are earthen vessels.

Of course all churches are a mixture of these symbolic figures. Christians are neither all heaven nor all earth, but a wondrous mixture of dust and glory, which is why churches are hospitals for the soul—less like sterile operating rooms scrubbed and sanitized for elective surgery and more like MASH units where mangled bodies of injured humans are rolled in for emergency treatment.

The situation of the 21st-century church is not that different from that of the first-century church in Jerusalem. Today we struggle to maintain a holy community in the church where the glory of God can shine brightly in the lives of God's humble servants. But we do so realizing that we are only human, and that strive as we may, we are not all holy.

In the first century the dividing line between exclusionary holiness and holy hospitality was circumcision, dietary laws and ritual observance. Today it is homosexuality, gay marriage, women's ordination and the right of property ownership. Today's fixations are not the issues that divided Christians at Chalcedon or Nicea or even Jerusalem, but they are, nonetheless, issues on which we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

It would have been so much easier if the Spirit had left well enough alone and not blown where it did, showing Peter the wider dimensions of a gospel meant for all people, both clean and unclean. But the Spirit is a spirit of love and cannot resist drawing disparate elements together; it has a broader vision of the future and a greater hope for our humanity than we have ever imagined, a vision articulated by the 148th Psalm, which sings of a time when all the earth and all created things shall praise the Lord. Angels praise God, sun and moon, sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, kings and peoples . . . all of us praise the Lord. Salvation, occurring in all times and places through the Holy Spirit's direction, is today offered to one and to all.