

Blogging toward Sunday (Acts 11:1-18)

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In this series, authors offer reflections on the Sunday lectionary texts. Feel free to post a comment.

This is a staggering narrative on which the future of the church pivots. It is also an uncommon narrative, one that features a trance, the Spirit and an angel. Consequently it will not fit any of our categories, for trance, Spirit and angel push us outside of the ordinary—outside the box of our control, our explanations and our certitude.

I suggest that the sermon should focus on the originary power of the narrative experience to make new. Listeners are then invited not to “hinder God” as they glimpse the newness that God is working (v. 17). This newness here parallels the “new commandment” of the Gospel reading, that “love of one another” overrides all previous distinctions made in previous commandments (John 13:35).

The trance reported by Peter places Peter (and his church) exactly “in between” (a) the old purity requirements and (b) God’s new verdict on what is “clean.” Were I preaching this text, I might read at some length the purity rules of Leviticus 11:2-28 and Deuteronomy 14:3-20 in order to get the trance in context. I would do so not to trivialize the notion of purity but to invite the congregation to consider quickly its own list of what or who is unclean and abhorrent. We might consider our contemporary “purity codes” that find “impure” all those unlike us. In dominant culture that could include Blacks, Hispanics, Muslims, illegal immigrants, gays and lesbians, poor people, aging people—all those who do not meet our expectations of “productivity.” Peter lingers over the “codes,” but must hurry to catch up with a new verdict rendered in the trance.

The Spirit follows after the trance. The Spirit leads to a meeting with six brothers who are unlike “us,” and causes the speaker to remember the baptism into newness. The angel invited them to receive a “saving message” (vv. 13-14). The three transcendent initiators invite the church to a newness:

- The trance yields a new verdict on “clean.”
- The spirit urges that there is “no distinction.”
- The angel offers a saving message.

The saving message and the new verdict are about no distinctions. The remarkable summary in verse 17 is that the same gifts are given to “them” as to “us.”

In context the “them and us” are Jews and Gentiles, as the good news breaks beyond purity codes. It takes no imagination, however, to move that verdict of “no distinction” into contemporary form:

- blue and red
- liberal/conservative
- a dozen other “distinctions”

The reason the text continues to be urgent is that the church finds endless ways to resist the trance, to reject the spirit and to set up distinctions. In this sermon, the church may be dazzled by the move from heaven to break open the earth beyond our pretentious arrangements. The break may be taken as threat, as a gift, as challenge, as opportunity, but however it is taken, the break is the truth of the gospel. Embracing the new commandment leads

to life (v. 18; see John 18:34). Conversely, the old distinctions produced death everywhere by way of fear, of anxiety, exclusion and sometimes of violence. Imagine that we are all invited to “the same gift” (v. 17)—no distinction, no privilege, no advanced notice and no advantage in better faith or better future. All are “clean”!