

Sermon on Acts 11:1-18, John 13:31-35
Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

You'll never guess what one of my favorite television shows is these days. Give up? It's *Bizarre Foods* starring Andrew Zimmern. It plays on the Travel Channel on Tuesday evenings. If you've never seen it, Andrew is a plump, native Minnesota who travels the world observing how local, regional foods are prepared, and tastes them – no matter how bizarre they may seem. He loves to eat, has very liberal taste buds and a large, iron stomach – which is a good thing. The series began in Asia, but continues throughout the world. Andrew watches – and we learn – how the strangest and the most delicious culinary delights are made and enjoyed – from all kinds of animal products – ears, feet, stomachs, intestines, kidneys, sex organs - as well as different kinds of plants, fish, frogs, lizards, snakes, creepy crawly things and even insects, all made into edible delicacies. (It's all a matter of taste – and what you grow up with!) In the first episode from Japan and Thailand, Andrew chewed on pig testicles, raw octopus sushi, a frog's beating heart and drank turtle blood with *sake*. He drew the line at the rich, aromatic fruit called *durian* – prized in Thailand and Cambodia, but disdained as too smelly for most Western palates! In a more recent episode, Andrew explored his roots in rural Minnesota (around Wilmar, I think), where he devoured more bland Scandinavian cuisine, but still couldn't get himself to swallow *lutefisk*! My wife and I have a hard time with that, too – Kim says it really needs pepper – HOT pepper!

So, what is the strangest, most bizarre food that you have ever eaten? Is it that smelly Norwegian cheese called *gammal ost*? *Kim chee* – or just bad sauerkraut? I remember on my first trip to Hainan island in the south China sea in 2002, when Kim's uncle offered me a toast – with some kind of drink that came from a glass jar soaking a whole snake in whiskey. Just a sip went down like fire! And in rural Cambodia, we stopped at a farm where they served food by a small stream, where we ate fresh-caught fish and goat stew (a goat is called "*Jim*" in khmer!). We noticed that the veggie dip had this sour, hot and spicy flavor – not surprising, because on close inspection we saw that it was made from a mixture including red fire ants! Luckily, we made it out alive! Today I can proudly report that I can eat fresh durian without any sweet rice or sugar, after attending a Cambodian relative's wedding in Rhode Island. So what is so strange that YOU have eaten? Maybe we should have an adult forum on strange foods!

So today our first lesson is the story of a strange dream that the apostle Peter had about food, which led to one of the most amazing turns in theology in the

history of the early Church! It began in chapter 10 of Acts, which we didn't read, which introduces a Roman army officer, a centurion named Cornelius, who lived in Caesarea. This was an ancient, pagan city on the Mediterranean Sea that was rebuilt by the original King Herod the Great, renamed in honor of Caesar Augustus, and became the administrative center for the Roman province of Galilee. Cornelius is described as "a devout man who feared God with all his household". (He probably worshipped all the Roman gods, as well as the God of Israel – but he was an inquiring, religious man.) At about that time Peter was just down the coast in the town of Joppa, and went up on the roof to pray. He was hungry, and while he was waiting for lunch, he had a strange vision – you guessed it – about *food!* He dreamed that a large sheet came down, filled with all kinds of four-footed creatures, reptiles and birds, many that were forbidden in Judaism for him to eat – but a voice invited Peter to eat *anything* that God had made. "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" Peter puzzled over what this dream meant – he couldn't understand it. Then messengers from Cornelius came over – Cornelius had heard of Peter and wanted to hear what he had to say. So Peter went to Cornelius' house, and heard that he had also had a dream – to invite Peter to his house! Then Peter realized what his dream had meant – "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*" So Peter shared with Cornelius the good news of Jesus – who he was and what he had done, and that God had raised him from the dead. Then the Holy Spirit came upon everyone in the household who was listening, and everyone was baptized in the name of Jesus – Gentiles as well as Jews! It was astounding to the Jewish Christians who had come along with Peter.

So, word got back to the apostles and believers in Judea about what had happened with Peter and Cornelius in Caesarea. When Peter came to Jerusalem, the others criticized him – "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" They weren't Jews! So Peter told once again the whole story of his strange dream, and what he had learned that it meant. He said, "*I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 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? 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.'*"

This was an amazing episode in the life of the Church. It had become clear to the apostles that the power of the Holy Spirit could even come to Gentiles – those who were not circumcised Jews – AND one did not have to be a follower of the Jewish faith, or follow kosher dietary customs, traditions or laws to be baptized and believe in Jesus. This was at the same time as a great persecution of Christians was taking place, after the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr – so relations were

very strained between those in the Jewish faith who believed in Jesus as Messiah and those who didn't. It was a scary time. Many of the persecuted fled to Antioch, in Syria – the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The story goes on to tell how word about the Lord Jesus came to Greek-speaking Jews (called *Hellenists*) there in Antioch. Many of them believed and were baptized, and scripture says that this was the first place where believers in Jesus were called “Christians”. Antioch thus became one of the great centers of early Christianity, sending out missionaries like Paul and Silas, Barnabas and Mark. The Christian church there has survived for 2000 years, all the way to the present day. But now the church in Antioch is very much at risk of disappearing - as Christians flee persecution by ISIS and the civil war in Syria. The scripture story in Acts reminds us how little has changed in many ways over 20 centuries of the human story – how people of many faiths are divided because of their beliefs, yet God continues to intervene to send us the message that *faithfulness to God and love for one another is more important than anything that divides!*

Such words – that there is more that unites us than divides us – has been used by many over the years, in critical times. They have been used in politics, in race relations, and by those seeking world peace. In fact, candidate Hilary Clinton used these same words regarding her and rival Bernie Sanders in the midst of their intense campaign for a presidential nomination. When I heard her say that in a speech last week, I thought “I’ve heard this before!” but where? Sure enough, I heard it again on Thursday, during a workshop on relations with the Roman Catholic Church as we approach the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. Pope John the 23rd (who brought renewal to the Catholic Church in Vatican II) famously said “*there is more that unites us than divides us*” – which has helped inspire 50 years of ecumenical dialog, which we hope will one day unite the Christian churches of the world in full communion with each other. Still, it seems an insurmountable dream that one day Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches will be united – too much has been said and too much blood has been spilled over 500 years. Yet there is a glimmer of hope, now that Pope Francis has said that he will participate in a service of Common Prayer this October 31 (Reformation Day) in Lund, Sweden with the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation. Will wonders never cease with this pope, and with our God?

But isn't this what the first believers also said when they witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit when Peter reached out to Gentiles in Caesarea, like Cornelius? The good news is that God powerful works continue despite the barriers of religion and custom that we put up between us, which act like walls to prevent interaction or unity. There were seemingly impregnable barriers between Jews and Gentiles in those ancient days, between Jews and Romans, beyond faith alone, but also of language, customs, culture, and certainly around power! The Greeks and Romans

had religious practices which included eating the meat that was sacrificed to the gods in their temples, which made them pagans and unclean, according to faithful Jews and Christians. But then Peter, a Jew and a Christian, met this one “pagan”, God-fearing Roman officer named Cornelius, whose openness to faith in Jesus led to his receiving of power through the Holy Spirit, and his baptism into Christ. It was beyond the imagination of those early believers, who thought that one could only become a believer and receive such power if you first practiced the same beliefs and customs as they followed – and became “like them”.

How much is different, and how much is the same today, in our world? Aren't we also divided by the same idea – that we are united only with those who share our culture, language and faith, and forever divided from those who are “different”? We sometimes say that in America we are “different” – that we are created by our constitution, and are united by our citizenship and our laws, not by religion, faith, or the color of our skin. But you and I know that this is seldom the case – that there is much that divides us, and the strongest divisions can be between faith, language, culture, and skin color. We are also divided by economics, by our education, by our privileges and our prejudices. When we look at our divisions in society, in politics, and faiths - the gaps that seem to be growing wider all the time – it often seems that the opposite is true: *that there is more that divides us than unites us!* If you listen to the political rhetoric of our present presidential campaign, the prospects for unity can be very discouraging. Some of those who speak the loudest have heightened the fears of those who don't know or understand those who are different from them. And so our differences over gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality and race have too often been used to political advantage, to create fear and hatred of undocumented immigrants and refugees, for persons who are transgender, for Muslims and speakers of Arabic. We have turned the richness of human differences, and the distinctions that make us all unique, into divisions that make us distrust and fear one another – a sin that we share as human beings. Hasn't this been going on since the beginning of time, since the Biblical days of Noah? It's nothing new.

Except now we know that God provides a better way, through faith in the God who has made the whole world, who has made all creatures and human beings out of love. We have our essential unity as creatures of God, and as humans, in being beloved children of God. Our differences in language, race, and culture are there to make us beautiful in our uniqueness, to reflect the glory of God who could make us so different, yet all equally loved! God sent Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago as one more example of grace, to bring the message of God's love for all people and living things in all its power, to break down the boundaries and barriers that we have put up against one another.

In the gospel lesson read today, when Jesus gathered with his disciples for a Last Supper before he was betrayed and crucified, he told them to “*love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” He said this, knowing that one of them would betray him that very night. He said this knowing how little they would understand of what he was saying, that there were so many ways that they would fall short of his friendship and trust. But he gave them an example that night of his love, by washing each of their feet like a servant, and on the next day, by giving his life on a cross.

So you and I have been called by Christ to “*love one another, as I have loved you*”. We, too, have Jesus’ example of loving service to follow, as well as his example of courageous, self-giving love for others. How often we have fallen short of this commandment, and Jesus’ example! Like Judas, we betray our Lord when we betray our values of faith and trust in God. Like Peter, we betray our Lord when we say we don’t believe, or don’t even know him. We fall short of Jesus’ commandment to love when we criticize harshly other Christians, and speak with hate and distrust about people of other faiths, other nations, or of those with whom we disagree. Still, God still loves us, and Christ still calls you and me to love. For we know that Jesus loves us even when we do fall short, and loves us knowing that we will! Jesus invites you and me to come home, to repent and turn around, for he does forgive us, will welcome us back and show us once more how to live with love.

So in these days when it seems that all we hear and see on the news are stories of violence and hate against other people, Jesus gives us a new way to live, with the example of service and acts of courage and conviction out of love for God and neighbor. We have the opportunity as Christians to serve our neighbors in Project Home and out in the community, and to love one another whenever we come together as a community of faith. We have opportunities to be witnesses to this love at our State Capitol, and in all our dealings with other human beings. We can teach our children the value of faith, of worship to God, and of love for other people in all our words and actions. We can show our love for people across the world and across the street, as we assist those who are suffering or in need. In the coming weeks we will hear more from the scriptures about how God empowers you and me to love through the gift of the Holy Spirit, in very real ways. Today we open ourselves in prayer, for our Lord to guide us and the Spirit to give us the power to love one another, just as Christ has loved us - in the name of Jesus. Amen.