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Sara Gaston Barton
sara.barton@pepperdine.edu

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Praising God When we Realize We've Been Wrong

SARA GASTON BARTON

This sermon was presented at the 2013 Pepperdine Bible Lectures. It was part of a morning worship series that opened each day's events with texts from the daily lectionary. Before this sermon, worship was led by Chris Stivers, prayer was offered by Jimmy Cone, and scripture was read by D'Esta Love.

While raising Nate and Brynn, I was determined they would not be picky eaters. I know in the whole scheme of things in the world, being a picky eater is not the most important characteristic we hope to engender in our children but, for me, it is a big one—and I like to think my reasons are theological. Table fellowship is central to the human experience of community—we were missionaries in Uganda, and I wanted my children to fully appreciate the food given to us by people who sacrificed for our family when they served us the exotic jackfruit out of the trees in their yards, the millet that was the product of their hard work in the fields, and the chickens that they really, literally sacrificed for us. I will never forget the flurry of activity when we arrived at a friend's home in Uganda, and all the children in the home were told to go catch a chicken for the visitors. The chickens scattered as the children chased them, and one poor squawking hen was snatched and soon became our lunch.

It was beautiful to learn about generosity of spirit from people with so little who shared so freely. I was determined that my children would appreciate it. One of my proudest moments, right there with pictures of graduation and honor roll awards, was when Nate and Brynn dug into a big bowl of roasted termites, and I snapped their picture as little termite wings and tentacles stuck to their lips. The look on some of your faces right now helps make my next point: we respond to things we don't like with disgust.

Richard Beck, in his book, *Unclean*, writes about that look of disgust. He describes it like this: "...disgust is characterized by a distinctive facial response seen in the wrinkling of the nose and the raising of the upper lip.... [W]e know that this distinctive facial expression is a cultural universal. All humans make the same face when experiencing disgust."¹

Well, my goal with my children was that when they were exposed to a new food, they would not respond with disgust but with openness. I hoped they would genuinely and with excitement want to try new things, to experience the wide world of tastes that I believe is one of those fingerprints of God's imagination and creativity. So, thanks to the wisdom of *The Holy Bible* and another important classic, *Green Eggs and Ham*, I must brag and say that one of our family's favorite things to do together is to try new foods.

Despite my success in this parenting goal, however, God must keep me humble, so we did eventually encounter one food Nate does not like. Mushrooms. He has tried them various ways, with an open mind, but he does not like them in a box. He does not like them with a fox. He does not like them here or there. He does not like them anywhere.²

1. Richard Beck, *Unclean* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 15.

2. Here I'm referencing beloved phrases from Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* (New York: Beginner Books/Random House, 1960).

He especially did not like them when we were at our neighbor's house one evening and mushrooms were served, not a part of the soup or a topping on the pizza, but as a side dish. A big bowl of straight mushrooms. Nate, knowing it was polite to take a bit of everything that was passed, put some mushrooms on his plate. And he tried. He tried to keep an open mind. He *wanted* to show appreciation and respect for what he had been given. But the look of disgust on his face as his own hands brought those mushrooms to his own mouth and eventually chewed them, was—well, you know that look, a look of disgust. And if you are seeing our text today properly, you will see that look as you hear the word of God from Acts 11.1–7:

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'"

We have to hear the collective gasp here; we have to see the look of disgust that Nate makes when he's served mushrooms. This moment is pregnant with suspense as the circumcised believers hear the story, picture Peter eating unclean foods, and respond with a visceral response, a look of disgust. Peter says what they all are thinking. "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth'" (Acts 11.8).

I like the versions that translate this response, "No way, Lord!" That, I think, better captures our American dialect. We can see little children looking at a new food with disgust, and saying, "No way am I going to eat that!"

Peter continues: "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying" (Acts 11.9–11).

This is actually a story told twice in Acts. It's Luke's way of emphasizing the importance of the story. So, it's relayed by the narrator in chapter 10 by the narrator, and here in chapter 11 by Peter. The chapter 10 version tells us that this house was a tanner's house and, from studies of ancient Israel, we know it's likely that a tanner's house was on the outskirts of town because tanning involved taking the skins of dead animals, carrying the stench of decaying flesh, and rubbing them with animal brains and dung and urine. A tanner's house was already a nauseating place to be even before the pig dream. Oh, the irony—Peter stands on the roof of a tanner's house amid the stink of dung and urine, and he defends kosher food laws!

Peter says, "No way, Lord!" to a vision of a picnic blanket that he knows is being offered to him by God. With that scene in mind we hear Peter say:

The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11.12–14).

While visions are not generally our method of discernment in our modern world, they were respected in ancient days. Luke uses them throughout Luke and Acts. Remember how Mary first received a vision, and then Joseph was able to understand because he also received a vision? Corroborating visions were evidence. They were useful for discernment. And one thing Luke doesn't want us to miss is that even Mary, a young woman at the bottom of the social pyramid of her day, with no social capital or respect, in a forgotten place like Nazareth, was worthy of God's vision. And here—stretch even further—even a Gentile like Cornelius is worthy of a word from God.

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the

Holy Spirit.” So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way? When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, *even* to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11.15–18, italics added)

This passage is obviously about more than Peter’s dietary preferences. Food, for people in ancient Judaism, was much more than *food*. And who you ate with was about much more than chewing food side by side—it was about acceptance and equality in relationships. So, when Peter stood on that roof and said “No way, Lord!” and later when the circumcised believers were questioning him, it wasn’t just about the food. It was about the people. They weren’t just turning up their noses at food; they were disgusted by people. They were disgusted because of human beings they considered unclean. And the point is that God has made not only food but also people clean through power of the Holy Spirit.

When Luke constructed this passage in Acts, he was using all his creative and writing talents to meet a specific purpose. He crafted it; he put it together with great care. And he very specifically decided to tell this story twice. This story is so central to Acts—and to the Gospel in the big picture—it needed to be told twice. In chapter 10, we hear about the sheet, and the animals and the “No way, Lord!” from the narrator’s perspective. And then here in chapter 11, we hear about the sheet and the animals, and the “No way, Lord!” from Peter himself.

Why would Luke do that? The story is repeated for a reason. Luke is showing us that tricky process of human decision-making at a time when the church was called to include people they did not want to include. Luke is showing us how the church took a risky step, involving great struggle—requiring them to fundamentally reinterpret everything they believed.

At these Pepperdine Bible Lectures, many of you are leaders and devoted servants in your churches, and if anyone knows of the great struggle in Churches of Christ to fundamentally reinterpret some long-held beliefs, it is you. It is us.

Here’s one thing we can all agree on: when God moves in new and unfamiliar ways, everyone is not always happy about it. There is almost always resistance. And this text asks us a hard question: Are we capable of becoming excited about how we may have been wrong? Look at the end of the passage. The circumcised believers in Jerusalem praised God...*because they realized they had been wrong!*

How do we get there? How do we get to the place of praise when God includes people we don’t think should be included? For most of us, it just feels safer to maintain boundaries. It’s just more comfortable for everyone involved if we don’t change things. But the Gospel teaches us that great joy comes with movement. Keeping up with God’s love in this world has always been hard—it has always stretched us—but the Gospel demands it. It means that we have to study the Scriptures. And it means we have to know how to recognize the Holy Spirit in others.

There’s no time to answer all the questions about how that works here today. But, we can respond to the text with some introspective, heart-wrenching questions:

- Today, are we keeping up with God’s action of inclusion in the world?
- Do we believe God is still on the move, surprising us with unimaginably open arms of love?
- Do we believe God might still surprise us by including marginalized people whom we do not think should be fully included?
- Most importantly...are we willing to praise God if we find that we’ve been wrong?

SARA GASTON BARTON IS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF RELIGION AT ROCHESTER COLLEGE AND AUTHOR OF *A WOMAN CALLED: PIECING TOGETHER THE MINISTRY PUZZLE* (LEAFWOOD PRESS, 2012). SHE CAN BE REACHED AT SBARTON@RC.EDU.

