

My dad is an excellent prayer of the blessing before dinner. When I was growing up, my family recited the old staple, “God is great, God is good” as a family and we’ve returned to that with the arrival of my niece and nephews, but in the years that my parents were pining for grandchildren, we ventured out from our traditional mealtime blessings. We began rotating who said the blessing when we had meals together and periodically it would be my dad’s turn.

His blessing always went this way, “Heavenly father, please make us truly grateful for this and all our many blessings. Forgive our sins, bless our absent ones, and keep us all safe in Jesus’ arms.”

Clearly, I’ve heard it a time or two. And, I might add, it’s theologically sound!

One day, however, my dad added an additional line to his trustworthy, well-worn blessing. He added, “And give us all a spirit of love and tolerance.”

My mother and my four siblings and I started looking at each other with bowed heads.

Finally, one of us spoke up, “So, what’s up with the love and tolerance?”

Dad never said a word more about it. Periodically the phrase would creep in and out of his blessing, sometimes we prayed for love and tolerance, and sometimes it disappeared. “So, dad, no love and tolerance today?”

He has, to this day, never indicated why love and tolerance appear some times and not others. I personally think it’s my siblings. Or maybe their spouses.

One day, however, I pressed my dad about his blessing. I added, “Well, dad, you know what the verb form of tolerance is – I’m not sure you’d really want to say to someone, ‘I tolerate you.’”

To which he replied, “Some days I’m doing well to tolerate some folks.”

The early church had a bit of a toleration problem, or so it might seem.

Now it is very easy to Sunday-morning quarterback the attitudes that seem evidently self-explanatory to us today. *Of course* we know that you don’t have to be circumcised to be a Presbyterian. *Of course* we know that we don’t have to eschew bacon and wool-blends as we’re eating breakfast and dressing for church. *Of course* we know that we don’t have to become Jewish first before we can become Christian.

Of course we know all of these things. But the early church didn’t know it, and that’s the point.

For the early church, they had just begun to work their way up to tolerance when Peter blew the lid off the whole thing by baptizing some Gentiles.

To be fair to Peter, he didn’t just wake up one day and decide to scandalize the church.

He too, worked his way up to it. It had to become clear. Indeed, he took a bit of convincing.

You heard his recounting of the scenario just a few minutes ago. In a series of seemingly bizarrely connected incidents Peter progressed from tolerance to love in short order.

We don’t know, of course, what Peter’s attitudes were like. His attitudes may have remained just as obstinate and obtuse as they were in the beginning, but he started *acting* like he loved the folks which whom he shared this experience. I love that old quote from

C.S. Lewis that goes something like this, when you don't feel very Christian, try acting like one.

It all starts with a vision.

The sheet was lowered down from the heavens with all sorts of animals in it and a voice from the heavens – it's not identified as God per se, but when a voice calls out from the heavens, it is generally wise to listen to what it says – the voice says, “kill and eat.”

“By no means! I've never eaten anything unclean.”

That is sort of the same as saying, “Well, that's just not what I was raised to believe. It's all well and good for some folks, but not me, thank you. I'll just hold onto what I've always believed. Don't mind me, I'll just be over here doing my thing. Others can take care of this.”

The voice replies, “Do not call unclean that which God has made clean.”

Three times. Three times Peter hears this message.

Then the vision is over. It is as simple as that.

But we have been building to this vision for a very long time.

The Gospel writer Luke is the author of the book of Acts. (It's short for Acts of the Apostles, and it's the story of how Jesus' disciples learned how to be church after Jesus was resurrected and ascended into heaven.) And Luke has a pretty clear bias for inclusivity that develops through Acts.

Luke starts beating the drum of equality early on with his treatment of women and here in Acts, he lets it be known that the disciples came to know that the Word of God was to come even to the Gentiles.

Now I don't have anything against gentiles. Some of my best friends are gentiles.

Do you know what a gentile is? The word comes from a derivation of a French word that means clan or tribe. It was how the earlier translations of the Bible dealt with the Hebrew term *goyim* or the Greek term, *ethnoi*.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but it means *other*. For a Jewish audience it would have meant non-Jew. It is anyone who isn't born of a Jewish mother. It's the other clans or tribes.

It's not meant in an ugly way. It's simply a distinction – Jewish, or non-Jewish.

Throughout the Bible, God is always talking of the Israelites, God's chosen people, being a blessing to the *ethnoi* and the *goyim*. It just means everybody else. God is always talking about God's people being a blessing to everybody else.

The problem is when the chosen begin to think of themselves as more important to God or worse, as the better.

Then we have a problem.

Whenever God's people (this is true in every era) stop thinking of themselves as distinctive and start thinking of themselves as better, this is a big problem.

That is when distinctiveness, which is value neutral, turns into exclusivity, which is decidedly not value neutral.

To be fair to the early church, this couldn't have been easy.

I'm not sure ever letting go of old patterns is ever easy, is it?

It's just part of who we are to want something to hold on to, don't you think?

I mean, holding onto traditions is how we know who we are, isn't it?

I'll use myself as a case in point, so that I don't look like I'm after anyone. I'm a theologian. I love theological language because it's so rich. I get my jollies out of

reading the Book of Confessions. Well, no, that last part's a lie, I don't, but I love what the Book of Confessions represents. It says who we are. It's our history and our beliefs. But if I use language and phrases from the Book of Confessions and nobody knows what I'm talking about – well, it's not very useful, now is it?

It's the same with the distinction between gentile and Jew in the early church. If it's not helpful to God's will of showing a distinctive way in the world, let it go.

And so we come to the dietary restrictions that Peter was so reluctant to set aside. "I've observed them my whole life, I can't let that go!"

But the distinctions have led to exclusions of clean and unclean and God's way has no use for that.

A side note, so we're clear, some will say that this passage is about dietary requirements because that is the object lesson that the sheet contained. We might believe that except for what happens next.

Peter's vision is about people. No sooner does he snap out of his trance than at the door are gentiles seeking to meet with Peter.

Luke has been building to this moment throughout the story. There have been others - Samaritans, an Ethiopian eunuch – all edging us toward this showdown of faith and practice: can faith in Jesus Christ ever allow a practice of exclusion?

Is the knowledge of God the exclusive property of one group, or is Christ indeed the Lord of all?

Because if Christ indeed is Lord of all, there are no more categories of clean and unclean - not for food, not for people. If indeed, Christ *is* Lord of all.

If that were not so, we wouldn't be here.

In the Gospel narratives, particularly Mark, Matthew and Luke, there is a recurrent theme that crops up again and again. As the followers of Jesus Christ are seeking to understand what the reign of God looks like, just at the moment where they think they have it nailed down, it moves. This happens particularly in Mark where the disciples are so often the foil for what Jesus is saying. They think they've got it sewn up, and then Jesus says, "No, you've missed it."

The work of God is always bigger than what we can see or think of. God's scope is always, in the words of the letter to the Ephesians, "exceedingly, abundantly more than we could ask or imagine."

We never have God nailed down because God is alive. God is always on the move, working for redemption and renewal and reconciliation.

Just when we think we have it sewn up, the danger flares need to start going off for us, because it is very likely we are shortly about to run afoul of God's will.

I'm reading one of Susan Howatch's novels right now – her books tend to have characters who are deeply flawed priests in the church of England. And as long as they remember the dangers of thinking they are not flawed, as long as they remember their dependence upon the power of God to hold their flaws at bay, they do good ministry. But as soon as the priest starts to think he has it all under control, the boom invariable drops. Such is the work of God. We can never think we have it all sewn up, that what we know of God tells us all we need to know of God. We must always be looking for where God is saying, "Do it this way. Do it differently. Get up, kill and eat."

It must seem odd for me to preach this message to a congregation so clearly focused on inclusivity. We may not always hit the nail on the head, but we are always trying, we

hope, to be the people God wants us to be. But if we think we've nailed, it, we better start to get nervous, because God might just shortly say to us, "Don't call unclean what I've made clean." And, inclusivity isn't just for church, either.

Of course, we don't sit around thinking about clean and unclean things do we?

Maybe the language will be just a bit more subtle?

You see, if Christ is Lord of all, then God's way is clear. *All* means *all* or it doesn't.

I love the end of Flannery O'Connor's short story, *Revelation*.

At the start of the story, Ruby Turnpin is sitting in the waiting room of the doctor's office with her husband Claude making earshot comments thanking God she's not like any number of other folks. Finally, a young woman clocks her with a book and mutters, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart-hog."

After she comes to and goes home, later that night, she has a vision. O'Connor writes:

"A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were tumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black [negroes]<sup>1</sup> in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces even their virtues were being burned away."

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<sup>1</sup> Edited for homiletical purposes. O'Connor's original used the common epithet for effect.

Scared yet? If we are claiming to speak for God, we had better be. Because God won't be nailed down. God won't be sewn up. Even our virtues might be burned away, because God is alive and God is always doing a new thing.

Thanks be to God. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. God is love, and Christ is Lord. So God's story of redemption is never finished, which is why I love the way O'Connor ends her story,

"In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah."

Hallelujah, indeed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.