

“What God Has Made Clean”
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148
Fifth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 148

¹Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

²Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

³Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

⁵Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.

⁶He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

⁷Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,

⁸fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

⁹Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹²Young men and women alike, old and young together!

¹³Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

¹⁴He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God.

²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying,

⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision.

There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven,
being lowered by its four corners;
and it came close to me.

⁶As I looked at it closely

I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.

⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord;
for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’
⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven,
‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’
¹⁰This happened three times;
then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.

These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.

¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’

¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.

¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

¹⁷If 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?”

¹⁸When 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.”

The Sermon

We are accustomed, I daresay, to thinking, in our heart of hearts, that we can control our environment, but the Holy Spirit falls on whomever God chooses, and God’s plans make our delusions of being in control irrelevant.

There’s a weekly quiz show on public radio called *Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me*, with a host, a panel of three comedians, and various call-in guests, and they go over current events in kind of a playful way.

One Saturday in September 2014, the call-in celebrity was Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of a celebrated book which was made into a popular movie called *Eat, Pray, Love*.

The game they were playing is one they play every week called “Bluff the Listener”: they present three ridiculous scenarios, and the guest has to try to figure out which one is actually true.

They said to the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, “One of these is a true hate story for the ages.” (The opposite of a love story.) They ran through three different stories, and then Elizabeth Gilbert had to choose which one she thought was true.

And now you can play along as I read the three possibilities:

Was it A.) a brother and sister who haven’t spoken in 73 years because she ate his donut?

Or B.) the last two Jews left in Kabul, Afghanistan, who each had a synagogue, just so they could keep the other guy out of it?

Or C.) a guy who goes to every single game played by the San Diego Padres for the last eight years, home and away, just so he can boo one player?

Elizabeth Gilbert thought for a second and said, “Wow...”

Finally she settled on a guess. She said, “I’m going with C, because I think sports hatred is a deeper kind of hatred than any other human hatred there is.”

The host, Peter Sagal, said, “[Sports hatred is] a deep hatred...but not as much as the hatred felt by the last two Jews of Afghanistan.”

She said (disbelievingly), “No!”

He said, “It’s true! They absolutely hated each other, and they stayed in two different synagogues, and [each one] refused to go into the other’s. And they ended up living in the same building, but they still wouldn’t talk to each other until one of them died.”

As they were getting over the apparently true situation where the last two Jews in Kabul disliked each other so much that each one kept to his own synagogue,

Elizabeth Gilbert said,

“My husband’s mother didn’t talk to her brother for the rest of her life [from] the age of 30 because he insulted her cucumber salad. So I almost went with the first [answer]—”

And the host said, “Wait a minute...Your husband’s mother didn’t talk to her brother because he insulted—”

She said, “Ever again. And not only that, their descendants won’t speak to each other.”

And he asked the obvious question: “What did he say about the cucumber salad?”

She said, “He picked up a piece of cucumber and he said, ‘My doctor says there’s no nutrition in this, that you might as well just throw it out a window.’”

One of the panelists, Tom Bodett, chimed in: “And that’s it?”

And the host said, “That’s it?”

And Tom Bodett said, “That seems more directed at the cucumber.”¹

Isn’t it surprising how much we cling to the things that separate us?

And the lengths to which we will go to continue that separation, once we have staked out our differences?

And how easily it becomes entirely about “me” having to be against “you,” and not at all anymore about the cucumber?

My colleagues and I have been to some astounding places these past two weeks in Israel.

We’ve seen sites where pilgrim feet have trod for nearly two millennia;
we’ve been on a boat on the Sea of Galilee looking around at the landscape the Son of God saw with his own eyes and knew like the back of his hand;
we have pulled water up from what is almost certainly Jacob’s well;
we shuffled past the place in Bethlehem which for centuries has been claimed to be the spot where the very Son of God was born into the world (which may or may not

be accurate, but we were certainly in Bethlehem); we touched with our hands a mosaic floor in a synagogue near Tiberias upon which it would be almost impossible that he did not walk, stand, and sit down to preach.

But for all of that awe and wonder, nothing was more profound than the extraordinary people we were privileged to meet along the way.

There was the Palestinian peace activist who spoke to us uninterrupted for 45 minutes, telling us his story and his philosophy—how the occupying Israelis had murdered his brother; how he and his activist mother had been sent to jail and denied access to one another for three years, so they both went on a hunger strike for 17 days until finally they were allowed a half-hour visit.

And now, rather than keep living under the delusion that either the Jews or the Palestinians are going to get up and leave, he dedicates his life to bringing people together, not to come to any agreement, but to listen to each other, to hear each other, to get to know one another. He said with continuing astonishment that he—a Palestinian who had done prison time in an Israeli jail for public dissent—had been asked to help bring leftist Jews from Tel Aviv and right-wing Jews from Israeli settlements together to try to get *them* to listen to each other. (He said something like, “I’m still trying to figure out how I ended up in that position.”)

Then there was his colleague, a self-described right-wing Jewish settler who believes that God gave this land to the Jews thousands of years ago and therefore they have every right, even the responsibility, to claim it as their own. But in his righteousness, he had experienced an astonishing awakening a few years ago when he realized that for decades he had lived a few minutes’ walk from a long-established enclave of Palestinians, and knew nothing about them at all—he realized that he had not regarded them as anything, let alone people with equal stature as human beings in God’s eyes or this world’s eyes.

We heard from a young mother of three, married to a Palestinian Muslim who was murdered by Israeli police in circumstances much like the repeated stories of African Americans dying at the hands of police in our country— a minor infraction, a small misunderstanding, a nervous officer, a burst of fatal gunfire, the victim bleeding out while officers stand by, and a nagging sense that one population is powerless against a lethally armed, brutally inclined, racially biased police force.

She had an intensity in her eyes and her voice and her demeanor, but she had not come to speak to us about getting justice for the murdered father of her young

children. She was there to share with us the urgent need for people to talk to and listen to one another, rather than escalate a conflict that no one can ever win in an endless cycle of retaliation and counter-retaliation.

She came with her frequent speaking partner, a somewhat older Jewish Israeli man.

He had had a daughter who, like most young Israeli women, had two years of mandatory service in the armed forces. She was stationed at a highway checkpoint, one of many in the country between Zones A, B and C that signify differing levels of theoretical Palestinian control.

Any time there was any kind of incident reported, she would call her Dad at home, and while they wouldn't necessarily acknowledge what she was really doing—assuring him that she was alive and unhurt—she would always call within 30 minutes and talk about anything or nothing. He would hear her voice, which sometimes is all a parent needs.

Late one afternoon shortly before the end of her usual shift, there was an explosion. He heard about it on the news. Half an hour went by, and people were asking, “Did you hear the news?” It was a few hours later that he realized that the phone call was never going to come.

He went to bed for many days, hoping he would just die there.

He never told us what his career had been, but he gave the impression of being rational, intellectual, reasonable.

At one point, he told us, he had carefully thought through what he was going to do. He would go to a Palestinian area, with a gun, and, he figured, he could take out five Palestinians before they would be able to take him down. He said this thought process had been worked out as rationally as any he had ever had.

Somewhere along the line, the realization washed over him. He said, their blood is red just like mine and my daughter's. Their tears look just like my tears.

His solution was to become part of a group called the Parents' Circle. They exist to do very much what the other activists I mentioned are doing: as Ben said, “to find someone on the other side who will talk to me, about any subject in the world.” The point is not to agree, but to get to know one another. That is their only hope.

I kept wanting to ask him the question: what would you want me to say back home, to my congregation, my neighbors, my government. But none of us was going to interrupt him. And before I could ask it, he answered my question.

He urged us not to import the conflict. He said, specifically: Don't be pro-Israel. Don't be pro-Palestine. Be pro-Peace.

There are some people with whom I have shared some space and time in this world at whom I continue to be angry, and it is not a mark in my favor that I don't seek them out and try to overcome that by offering and, if necessary, asking forgiveness. I don't want to, and as long as I don't have to, I don't intend to; that's my problem and, to that extent, it's my fault. So I am not going to tell you to forget about or just "get over" whatever it is that you may have against somebody else.

But none of us has the authority to look at anyone else as less worthy than we are. If everyone is made in God's image, then whether you like them or not, whether you can deal with them or not, whether you ever need to see them again or not,

No one is outside the circle, and no one is beneath you.

What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Jew or Gentile; slave or free; Israeli or Palestinian; Serb or Croat; male, female, or no longer able to pretend to be part of those binary gender classifications—until I find that there is someone for whom Jesus did not die and for whom he has not been raised from the dead, then all I know is what God has made clean, and to call it profane is to deny the salvation bought at the tremendous cost of his blood on the cross.

You may remember the most popular movie critics of the late 20th century, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert; they were famously paired together, and notoriously competitive and occasionally combative with each other, and it was said that in their private lives they were not friends and rarely communicated.

Gene Siskel died far too young in 1999, and years later, when Roger Ebert was suffering from massive health problems of his own, he wrote to Gene's widow:

Dear Marlene,

I'm sick and old, and find myself thinking of Gene more than ever.

My stupid ego, and maybe his, complicated the fact that I have never met a smarter or funnier man.

We fought like cats and dogs. But there were times, often unobserved, like after a long hotel dinner we had once in Boston, when I've never felt closer to a man."

After Ebert died in 2013, she said of the two men, "I think their relationship evolved. They grew to respect each other. And I do believe they did love each other."ⁱⁱ

We are accustomed to being able to control our environment, to decide who is in and who is out, who's right and who's wrong, who is an enemy, and who is acceptable.

But the Holy Spirit falls on whomever God decides to give it to. And God's plans make our delusions of being able to make those decisions irrelevant.

Back in 2001, the week after 9/11, I phoned an imam with whom I was vaguely acquainted through an interfaith clergy group with which we were both involved, and I asked what he thought about the possibility of us exchanging benedictions for our respective congregations. By the end of that day, he had sent me these words, with which I closed our church's worship service the following Sunday:

As-Salaam-Alaikum (The Peace, G-d's Peace be on You)

Brother Keith

We at Tauheed Islamic Center, Pray that Allah (G-d) grant you and [your church] peace, mercy and blessings.

*May your devotion to what is just and good
influence devotional excellence in others.*

*May Almighty G-d forever guide you among those whom He has guided aright,
and preserve you among those whom God has preserved and befriended,
and bless you in all that is good.*

For those whom G-d befriends are in a most excellent state of grace.

*May this exchange be a bridge we can give as a charity for humanity to cross
inviting to all that is good,
enjoining what is right
and forbidding what is wrong.*

Your brother in faith

*Imam Abdul Rahman Shareef
Tauheed Islamic Center.*

What God has made clean, we must not call profane.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ From “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me,” originally broadcast September 27, 2014.
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ⁱⁱ Quoted in the CNN documentary film *Life Itself*, originally aired January 4,
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