

Cleansed by God

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In elementary school, I always dreaded lunch time. My parents were first-generation Chinese American immigrants, so I would never know exactly what to expect in my lunch box. One time, my mom gave me a fried dough strip with dried shredded pork, sugar, and sticky rice all rolled up in Saran Wrap. Another time, she gave me canned sardines in tomato sauce with Wonder Bread. I remember asking my mom, why can't I just have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches like the other kids? Sometimes I would be so embarrassed about my food that I would hide my lunch or eat far away from the other kids. I felt different; I felt like an outsider; I felt unclean.

Because of my traumatic childhood lunch box experiences, I can relate to the Gentiles in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Peter is confronted by the other disciples because they heard a rumor that he was eating at the same table as Gentiles. Now Gentiles were viewed by the early Christians as different, as outsiders, and as unclean because they did not follow the Jewish dietary laws.

We Christians today often forget that the first Christians, including Jesus and his disciples, were actually observant Jews. Those Jewish Christians followed strict dietary laws as to what was kosher or not. Only certain kinds of animals were clean enough to eat, and even then they had to be prepared in just the right way. By contrast, Gentiles did not follow those dietary laws, and they were therefore seen as unclean.

In response to their criticisms, Peter tells his colleagues about his rooftop vision in Joppa in which a large sheet filled with unclean animals descended from the sky three times. A voice from the heavens spoke to Peter, saying "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In other words, God had released Peter from the Jewish dietary laws. As such, Peter had permission to eat whatever God had made clean. Following his vision, Peter visited with Cornelius the Centurian, who was then baptized by the Holy Spirit along with his entire Gentile household.

Today's reading is actually a huge turning point in the history of Christianity. In fact, it could be argued that the rest of the New Testament is nothing more than an elaboration of this exact same theme. That is, as a result of God's amazing grace, Gentiles were made clean, and thus they could join the Church without first having to convert to Judaism. This message was ultimately so successful -- particularly after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century C.E. --

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that basically we have forgotten that our own spiritual ancestors were once observant Jews.

Of course, today's reading from Acts is about much more than just what we can or cannot eat. Today's reading speaks to an unfortunate truth about human nature. Let's face it, we all love to draw lines as to who is different, who is an outsider, who is unclean. Even those of us geeks and nerds on the Math Team in high school who played Dungeons and Dragons had our own rules as to who could or could not sit with us in the cafeteria at lunchtime.

Perhaps this is what original sin is all about. It wasn't so long ago that, by law, African Americans couldn't eat at the same lunch counters or drink from the same water fountains as white Americans. And segregation wasn't just a phenomenon in the deep south. Have any of you been to St. Augustine's Church, right here in Manhattan in the Lower East Side? That church was built in the 19th century with an enclosed balcony that was called the "slave's gallery" -- which you can still see today -- in which African Americans sat together while their white counterparts partook of the Lord's Supper below them.

I can't but help wonder if line-drawing was behind what motivated the attempted bombing in Times Square last night. Nothing is more threatening to those who seek to divide and conquer than the beautiful melting pot of different colors, ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds that come together at the crossroads of the world at 42nd Street and Broadway.

As some of you may know, May is celebrated as Asian American Heritage Month throughout the United States. In fact, there is a wonderful celebration at Union Square this afternoon with booths from many of the Asian American organizations in New York City. Be sure to check it out if you can!

Now most people don't realize that Asian Americans have been here in the United States since the 1700s, starting with Filipino sailors who settled in Louisiana in the 1760s. This was followed by Japanese sugar cane workers in Hawaii, and then the Chinese transcontinental railroad workers in the mid-1800s. However, the reason why Asian Americans seem like relative newcomers is that, for almost a century -- from 1875 to 1965 -- the United States had laws on its books that expressly banned Asian people from immigrating to this country.

These discriminatory laws were passed because, in the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese Americans were stereotyped by white Americans as being filthy, immoral, and carriers of diseases such as syphilis. The few Chinese American women that were in the United States (because they had been banned from entering the country early on) were viewed as cheap prostitutes who "lured and infected white youth and men with venereal diseases." Similarly, the bachelor society Chinese American men were described by one contemporary writer as "not coarsely filthy like [the] ignorant and besotted Irish, but

bearing a savor of inherent and refined uncleanness that is almost more disgusting." Gee, I wonder what this writer would have thought about me and my Irish husband!

Anyway, Asian Americans were to be avoided, and it was unsafe to come into close contact with them -- that is, us -- without being contaminated. Chinatowns were seen as overcrowded slums, filled with garbage, unbearable stench, and sick people. Although there was a Chinese American Presbyterian mission formed as early as 1852 in San Francisco, it wasn't until over a century later, in the 1950s and 1960s, that the mainline Protestant Churches started to integrate themselves with their Asian American sisters and brothers.

So who are the outsiders in our lives today? Who falls outside of the lines of what is acceptable for us, even in a neighborhood as colorful and diverse as Chelsea? Who is not present at coffee hour but should be? Transgender folk? Undocumented immigrants? People for whom English is not a first language? The homeless? Sex workers? Students and young people of color? Non-Christians? And, dare I say it -- people from Red States who voted for McCain/Palin? Today's reading from the Acts of Apostles challenges us to reflect constantly about who are the "Gentiles" among us today -- those who are different, those who are outsiders, and those who are unclean.

I no longer feel self-conscious about eating Asian food in public. Sometimes I like a bowl of steaming hot noodles. Sometimes I like a peanut butter jelly sandwich. Both dishes are an important part of who I am. Most importantly, however, I know that I am welcome at God's table, just as I am. Because what God has made clean, we must not call profane. And that's what the good news is all about!

+Amen.