Sermon on Acts 11:1-18
“The Deepest Intuition”

It was my first grand salvation moment. It didn’t feel like it at the time; in fact it felt like an “anti-salvation moment.” It wasn’t so much a moment as a growing realization.

I was 13 years old and had suffered enough torment from the idea of a God who might throw people in Hell for not saying the right words of belief, a God who seemed to be such a perfectionist that only a few people would ever escape that hell.

In truth it was the time in my life when I identified the God that had lodged in my mind for years as an ogre, a small-minded tyrant.

Later, I realized that I was beginning to develop my intuitive capacity to question received wisdom that wasn’t, in truth, wisdom at all.

In the moment I felt ready to throw out everything I’d been taught but later I’d discover that often my intuition wasn’t infallible; that even as intuition carried within it a primal truth, a foundational truth about myself and God’s goodness, sometimes it led me to cooperate with patterns and biases that were/are sinful and that at every step my core intuitions needed the support of scripture, of tradition and wise people.

Later in philosophy classes I’d learn about the hermeneutic spiral, the interpretive circle, the ongoing dance between experience, reason, scripture and tradition; but none of those moves could or can be made if we don’t dare to trust ourselves in the face of ideas of God that are no longer helpful.

I feel a little of that vibe when I consider the first reading assigned for this Sunday, a moment of Salvation that’s for sure! But a moment whose source is in the strange experiences, the trance, the vision, the angels—dare we call it the primal intuition of Peter, remember the saying “our better angels”?—

however we understand these things (and they have been understood variously in the tradition) what Peter experiences plays out against the interpretation of the scriptures, against the tradition that Peter has known.

Without this moment; without its primal power, it’s highly unlikely the church exists as a worldwide entity.

It is a testimony to the power of the Resurrection to break apart even treasured paradigms and revered interpretations of scripture that no longer serve God’s Loving Justice.

What we have here is a kind of lived example of Jesus’ “new commandment,” the call to love one another that overrides all previous distinctions made in earlier commands.

As background to what’s going on here, we acknowledge that as a species we are very proud of our “distinctives,” we hold to those distinctives as definitional of our nation, our religious groups, of our very selves.

It’s an original survival mechanism i.e. a way to distinguish friend and foe, that becomes the ultimate overfunctioning coping mechanism. I’ve read of instances in English soccer where a fan will show up in a neighbourhood wearing the “wrong colours,” the colours of a hated rival team and get mobbed and killed. Killed over the distinctive colour of your shirt!

And yet we know that distinctions are necessary even if they trend towards the harmful and often the deadly.

It’s hard to imagine the emergence of monotheism, the worship of One Living God, the great gift of Israel, without the distinctions outlined in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, distinctions related to purity, to food and to worship

Commands like the following, the background to Peter’s trance and vision, seem arbitrary and weird to us but at the time carried a cultural and religious logic:

Every animal that has divided hoofs but is not cloven-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean for you; everyone who touches one of them shall be unclean.

And you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. 44For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.”

Weird though these commands sound to us, we too have strange, almost arbitrary rites of distinction in our culture; male toddlers are dressed in blue, female toddlers in pink. Even progressive parents find it excruciatingly difficult to consider dressing their little boy in hot pink pants!

Distinctions go deep and are connected to identity and shame.

And yet what is revealed in this story is the first species-wide attempt, think about that, the first movement among human beings that begins to recognize that **those things which distinguish are not meant to ultimately define us!**

What is revealed to Peter is that all human beings, however different, however different they are from Jews, whether friend or foe, share in the astounding victory of God wrought in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ! Hallelujah!

The claim of the Gospel, the Good News of God is that every single human being’s identity, with their accomplishments and flaws, with every single quality that distinguishes them from each other is not found anywhere in those things which we think define us; but rather in the love of God revealed in this great event.

Of course, the “us and them” will continue to exist; of course there will be the gender continuum; of course there will be our tribal genetics, our different sensibilities and personalities, our different tastes and tendencies.

And in the New Testament we find that these are actually celebrated; rather than being understood as oppositional they become understood as harmonics within God’s orchestral score

They become the diversity that gives to Creation it’s zest and zing. But before that, we are here, in this moment of salvation, the erasure of our distinctions in the Good News of Jesus Raised, in the Grand News of the Spirit poured out on all, even upon the tormentors of Israel, the hated Centurions.

Bringing the hated Romans into inner sanctum, into the very heart of the Messianic band, which you’ll remember, it was hoped, would crush the Romans, was the most counter-intuitive move of all; as counter-intuitive as the Messiah dying on a cross!

The Church regularly betrays this core understanding of Salvation; we regularly split into conservative and liberal congregations, ethnic congregations, Rich congregations, poor congregations; and a dozen other distinctions.

We can regularly give the cold shoulder to guests and parishioners who are not “part of us,” who might dress a bit different, who are a different age, or don’t know the liturgical customs.

But according to this text, everyone in this room is not only welcome, everyone fits, everyone is necessary, there is no distinction in importance! All of us are part of what the Church has called the *plene esse*, the fullness of Christ; that is your identity: Loved partaker of paradigm-shattering Resurrection empowered Salvation!

Now go live it! What will that look like for us? It will mean that we participate in the Spirit’s vision in which disparate parts, distinct elements will continue to be drawn together.

Here’s a way to practice Resurrection identity. It’s a bit scary but it’s liberating in its truth. If someone asks you, asks me, “What do you do?” I generally say something like “I’m an Anglican priest serving two wonderfully diverse parishes.”

I have in that moment, however true, defined myself by a distinctive, a distinctive that steers the conversation, the relationship in a certain direction. I might have said, “I live my life as a Canadian, as a husband and father,” as an academic, all distinctions I’m proud of. None of those things are untrue but my core identity is more like this:

“What do you do?” I’m learning how to let God’s grace and Love define me, whether as a priest, a Canadian, as a husband or father; actually in all I do.

Now, if you take the risk to say that or something like it when someone asks you they’ll look at your strange, they’ll wonder what’s going on, but you’ll be speaking out of not only your deepest intuition but of God’s actual work in you and in the world

If you do it, what will happen will be a deeper conversation than you might ever have had with the bland, “I’m retired,” or “I’m working here” or “I’m doing this.”

Even if you can’t say that—and I’d really have to screw up my courage to do it, such is the pressure to fit in—take a pause before you answer and at least think it! Because, my sisters and brothers, this is the truth of your deepest self!

As our text says, we are baptized in the Holy Spirit, submerged in the Divine Life, drenched in a Love that never stops pursuing our best interest.

When you own who you are, when you trust your deepest intuition of God’s Salvation, you will be in touch with the God who chooses to dwell with mortals, whose desire has always been to bring together heaven and earth, even the centurion and the Jew and all those divided from each other in our world.