
Fighting Like Christians

Acts 11:1-18, with Psalm 148, and John 13:31-35

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The story we have just heard from the eleventh chapter of Acts records an historic encounter in the life of the church: as far as we know, the first instance of one group of Christians “diss-ing” another group—putting them down—on specifically religious grounds. This is, as we all know, something of a way of life in the church, and so we must listen with care to what this story is telling us, if we are going to get to the root of a bad habit. The problem is *not* Christians disagreeing about important religious matters; of course we will and should disagree with some regularity. But we need to acquire the habit of disagreeing in a way that teaches us all something about how God is working in our midst. So the Evangelist Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) tells us this story about how, once upon a time when the church was young, some Christians in Jerusalem started out dissing each other, and yet they ended up together learning something new about God. Luke is giving us, you might say, a model of how to fight like Christians. So let’s move through this story slowly, lingering over the details, looking for guidance in negotiating our own conflicts in the church.

Listen again to how that ancient fuss got started:

The apostles and the brothers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had accepted the word of God. When Peter went up to Jerusalem, those who argued for circumcision criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to those schmucks and eat with them? (11:1-3)

To unpack that scene: It’s Jerusalem, a little while after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, and the Jewish followers of Jesus hear startling news from down on the coast in Joppa (that’s Tel Aviv). Get this: *Gentiles*—Romans, pagans—are coming to faith in Israel’s God, through the preaching of Simon Peter. But when Peter comes to Jerusalem, no one celebrates his evangelistic triumph. Instead, the believers jump all over him, saying, “Why did you go to those *schmucks* and eat with them?” (11:3).

“Those schmucks”—I’m translating the Greek word in Acts with a coarse Yiddish expression, because these Jewish brothers are angry. The standard English translation is more refined but less real: “Why did you go to those *uncircumcised men*”—nobody really talks like that, except maybe medical personnel. Peter’s colleagues in Jerusalem use coarse language, because they aren’t happy about all these new Gentile converts, these schmucks who are joining the Jesus-movement—these same Romans who just a short time ago nailed Jesus to a cross. Here’s a rough historical analogy: it’s as though Alabama Governor George Wallace had sent a letter to Martin Luther King in the Birmingham jail and said, “By God, you’re right! I see the light.” Now how do you think the families and friends of the lynched would have felt? If you can answer that, then you begin to see why the Jewish followers of Jesus are suspicious of this turn of events, and angry at Peter’s response: “Why did you go to those schmucks and *eat* with them?”

“...And eat with them”—that is the most offensive part, because in Roman Palestine, questions of what you ate and with whom you ate it were as fraught with intense emotion as questions of sex and sexuality are in our society. Maybe it is no coincidence that both these matters have to do with how we use our bodies—as vehicles of faithfulness toward God and neighbor, or possibly as instruments of exploitation and abuse. Eating for traditional Jews, sex for many of us—both touch on our core understandings of how God has ordered the world and our place in it. So from the perspective of these first Jewish Christians, their brother Peter has broken faith with their endangered community by eating the non-kosher food of the Gentiles; he has sold out to the *goyim*.

Now, the first thing that is instructive for us about how to have a good fight within the church is Peter's reaction to their anger. He could go into defensive mode (I usually do): "Get off my back, will you?!" But instead Peter honors their bewilderment and explains "step by step," as our story says (11:4), just how he came to do something he never thought he would do. Having a good argument in the church takes patience on both sides, as we take the trouble to explain to each other how we are thinking—seeking mutual understanding instead of mutual destruction. So Peter tells the believers in Jerusalem about the vision that came to him in Joppa, when he was presented with a giant tablecloth full of non-kosher animals, and a heavenly voice said, "Go ahead, Peter, kill and eat." At first Peter himself was scandalized: "No way! I am a self-respecting observant Jew, and I don't eat *trajé*" (that's shorthand for all the stuff Leviticus tells Israelites *not* to eat). But the heavenly voice corrected him: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." In other words, "You've got the categories wrong, Peter. The old distinctions between kosher food and non-kosher, scriptural though they are—those distinctions between kosher and *trajé* no longer apply for those who are living in Christ. It's a new world, Peter."

Peter barely had time to swallow that before the second earth-shaking challenge came: the Spirit of God telling him to go to a house in the powerful Roman city of Caesarea—a Gentile house—"and to make no distinction between them and us" (11:12). *What?* No distinction between Jews and their Roman oppressors? Really, God? Ancient Jews had a rich sense of religious humor, but this heavenly joke must have seemed utterly tasteless. So this is the second thing to be learned from this story: when God challenges religious people like Peter and us to live and think in totally new ways, it sometimes feels like a very bad joke.

This whole story is about living in the new world that God brings into being after Jesus is resurrected from the dead. In other words, it is a story about new creation, and to make the point, the author Luke uses a lot of language from Genesis. He writes about the Spirit of God on the move in the church, just as it was moving at the creation of the world. Peter reminds the brothers of a time when the Spirit first came upon them "in the beginning" (11:15)—an echo of the first chapter of the Bible. Even the language of "making a distinction"—or in this case, *not* making a distinction between Jew and Gentile—that too echoes God's work of sorting out the physical elements in the first days of the world.

So this is a story about God creating something new in and through the church, and the surprise is that new creation in Christ does not always feel good. For Peter in Joppa, and later for the brothers in Jerusalem, new creation feels like an attack on the basis rules of society and maybe even on the structure of the universe. What if we are deceived? How can anyone be sure that this new way of living and thinking comes from God? That is why Peter resists the heavenly command to eat like pagans eat, and why the argument breaks out among the faithful in Jerusalem. Arguing over serious religious matters is inevitable; it is in fact the right thing to do, because it is genuinely difficult to know whether and when God is creating something new in the church.

That kind of argument is going on among Christians right now, about things that are as basic for us as eating kosher food was for Peter and the first Christians in Jerusalem. The church in our own time is convulsed over matters that touch the core of our religious understanding, our sense of the kind of world God gives us to live in. The really tough issues may be different for different people, or in different parts of the church. For some it has to do with women's ministry, for others with sexuality. Maybe we are divided over whether my own personal relationship with Jesus is the most important religious matter, or is it matters of social justice, or maybe ecological justice? Is it possible that on the Judgment Day, I will have to answer for the fact that half the species that existed when I was born have gone extinct in my lifetime—and still counting? Or maybe the core religious question concerns how Christians should relate to non-Christians: Muslims, or Jews, or people with no religious commitment. Is God calling Christians to seek deep common ground with them, to stand with them in the presence of God without making conversion a prerequisite or a goal—or is that a crazy, even blasphemous idea?

These are serious questions and serious arguments, and the story in Acts helps us think in a fresh and deeper way about them. The reason they are worth arguing over at all is because they have to do with how we as the church reckon with the doctrine of creation. Easter season is the best time in the church year to engage in such arguments,

now when the whole church focuses on the new world that God is bringing into being. The risen Christ is “making all things new” (Rev. 21:5), whether we can see it or not. If we take both God and the church seriously, then we will inevitably have some good fights. Let’s make sure they really are *good* fights, of the kind that we see between Peter and the brothers in Jerusalem, in which we explain our thinking to each other “step by step,” patiently listen to each other, gently push each other to think about (on the one hand) what God is creating in our generation and (on the other hand) what might constitute our faithful witness to new creation.

This we know for sure: all genuine witness is costly. If change comes too easily for the church, then it is probably not coming as the work of God. A few decades after the events we read about today, Peter paid with his life for the privilege of participating in God’s new creation, namely the fledgling Gentile church in Rome. He and other Jesus-followers were executed by the Emperor Nero, as a threat to the Empire.

Godly change in the church’s thinking and practices always costs Christians something. I remember my first day at seminary, when the Dean said, “If you don’t shed some tears in your time here, you will have missed the point. I had no idea then what he meant, but countless times in the decades since I have recognized the truth of his words. Life in the church costs us some tears, because we are by nature people of both tradition and repentance.

Tradition—that means we trust that there is wisdom in the past upon which we can and should draw. *Repentance*—that means that we do not idolize the past, the way our ancestors or we ourselves once acted and thought. We don’t even idolize Scripture, although we look to it as a reliable guide. No, we worship God alone, the living Lord who is making all things new, every day calling us to live in that new creation, sometimes through our tears. Because the church is a place of *both* tradition and repentance, it is necessarily also a place of disagreement and difficult change. This story gives us a model of respectful disagreement and godly change. In the end, I think this is the most important thing it has to tell us: healthful change in the church always comes from reflecting more deeply on the doctrine of creation, and living into it more fully. That is a fundamental challenge to our whole way of doing theology in the contemporary American church. So often Christians focus exclusively on the doctrine of salvation: “Are you saved?”—the implication being, “Probably not.” That kind of thinking inevitably leads to an ‘us-vs.-them’ view of the church and the world. But if instead we start with the doctrine of creation, “then we are already thinking in terms of a wholly encompassing ‘we.’”¹

If we begin there, then we cannot imagine, for instance, that humans are important to God, and animals or plant species or healthy water and soil are relatively unimportant. Nor can we imagine that only some humans are made in the image of God—say, those who eat or pray or love as I do, or have skin the color of mine, or support the political candidates I support. If creation in the image of God means anything at all, then surely it means that we are all much more like each other than we are different from each other.

If we begin with a doctrine of creation informed by the world-shaking resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we can be sure that God will not leave the church itself unshaken. On the contrary, just about the time we think we’ve got the world sized up and sorted out, who is on the right side of God and who is not—that is, whenever we start thinking we command the created order, then we can expect God to assert sovereignty in real time, exploding our neat categories, especially if they separate off one group of “favored” creatures from other less favored ones. God is forever making all things new, whether we like it or not. And we won’t always like it. My Dean was right, all those years ago: if we in the church don’t shed some tears, then we will have missed the point. God forbid we should miss the point.

¹ For this idea, I am indebted to the Rev’d Peter Harris (personal communication, Shanghai, November 2015).