

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2016

**Mom and Dad Know Best --- or Do They?**

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Acts 11:1-18

What is a good Jewish boy to do?

Saul of Tarsus, or Paul as he was later known, and Simon Peter were good Jewish boys. They grew up respecting what their parents taught them and were loathe to go against their Jewish teachings

Saul, of course, has his awakening on the road to Damascus where he encountered Jesus, and his life was changed forever. A militant oppressor of Jewish Christians became perhaps Christianity's greatest apostle.

Peter's life was turned around in a far different way. He was a Christian. He had accepted Christ. But he was also a Jew. His parents had taught him the Law of the Torah and that he had to respect them and observe the Law.

Following Jesus was not a problem for Peter. Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews had long awaited so to follow him fitted into what Peter had been taught but what happened to him in Caesarea changed everything.

Were it not for Saul's experience on the road to Damascus and Peter's experience in Caesarea, Christianity could well have remained as nothing more than an obscure sect of Judaism, but of course it didn't.

Both Saul and Peter learned that Mom and Dad did not always know best, and they learned it in startling ways.

Saul was a Pharisee, one of the keepers of Jewish law. Peter however was not a Jewish official. He was a humble fisherman who, probably unwillingly, became the leader of the early church. He had been taught what was clean and unclean. In the words of Walter Bruggemann, Peter's mother "... *had taught him about clean and unclean from the Book of Leviticus, about shell fish and reptiles and other disgusting*

*options [to eat].*" (The Collected Sermons of Walter Bruggemann, vol. 2, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2015).

But Peter had a dream of a large sheet descending to the roof where he was sleeping in Caesarea. On it were *"all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds."* Four-footed animals including pigs? Reptiles --- snakes and lizards? Birds --- eagles, vultures, buzzards? Quite possibly all of them.

Peter hears a voice saying, *"Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."* He refuses and hears the message two more times. He says, *"Surely not Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has even entered my mouth"* and the voice responds, *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."*

Leviticus 11 says, in part, *"These are birds you are to regard as unclean and not eat ..."* and it lists many bird species. It also lists four-footed animals, animals which walk on all fours such as lizards and rats, and those that move along the ground such as snakes.

For Peter to do as the voice said was totally contrary to everything he had been taught.

Then, to make matters worse, three servants of a gentile, Cornelius, appeared asking for Peter and inviting him to come to Cornelius' home, which Peter does rather reluctantly.

Going to the home of a gentile, lodging there and eating with gentiles was also prohibited for a Jew. Gentiles were unclean and Jews were never to associate with them. Jews just didn't do that. Mom and Dad told them so.

In a way, that sort of quandary faces many Americans and has done so time and time again.

Irish immigrants were avoided. They were Catholics and Mom and Dad said to avoid them.

What about immigrants from Eastern Europe, like Lithuania where my grandparents came from. They were Catholics too. Stay away from them.

Then came two World Wars and Japanese and German immigrants and their descendants, even if they were upstanding law abiding citizens, were shunned. You can't have anything to do with these people --- no sir!

Then came people of Hispanic descent, Cubans, Guatemalans, and others but most particularly Mexicans. Watch out for them. You never know what they might do.

Now it is Muslims. We all know that they are terrorists. It doesn't matter if they were driven from their homes by ISIS and had friends and family members killed. You can't trust them. Mom and Dad say so.

History repeats itself over and over again and Mom and Dad don't seem to learn.

It took the Holy Spirit to go with Peter to Cornelius' home and to descend upon the people there and to bring those unclean gentiles to Christ.

Caesarea for Peter and Damascus for Paul were seminal moments which taught them what following Christ really means.

Paul went on to evangelize throughout the gentile world and Peter went back to Jerusalem to explain to the other disciples what he had experienced saying, *"If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?"* The disciples said, *"So then even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life."*

God's grace extends to all of his people, even those Mom and Dad may have taught us to avoid --- the Irish, the Eastern Europeans, the Japanese and Germans, the Hispanics, the Syrians, everyone. Jesus told us to love our neighbors and all of them are our neighbors.

When are Christians everywhere truly going to do that? No sooner is one group accepted than another group seems to be excluded.

Many Christians are like the Torah-observing Jews in many ways but eventually we learn, as Paul and Peter did, that Christians are to be inclusive, not exclusive. But unfortunately with each succeeding generation, some moms and dads seem to forget that lesson and don't teach it to their children.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbors as yourself, no matter where they come from, no matter what language they speak, and no matter what religion they practice.

That is what Jesus expects Christians to do.

**Amen.**

Note: All scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011.