

Sermon for Sunday May 15, 2022  
Acts 11: 1-18

**Prayer:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

One evening a grandfather told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He said, "My son, there is battle between two "wolves" inside us all.

One is **Death**. It is anger, envy, jealousy, greed, arrogance, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and fear.

The other is **Life**. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The Grandfather replied, "The one you feed."

This morning's scripture lesson serves up for us some interesting food for thought.

The lesson tells us of a heavenly picnic - that - a blanket came down with creepy - crawling snakes and vultures and other weird animals on it in a dream that Peter has. In fact, the heavenly blanket comes down three times. And, each time the blanket descended, Peter said, "No, not me!" I will not eat.

Peter's "no" response to God's picnic invitation was not mere squeamishness. Peter found the menu repulsive. None of those animals was acceptable food. Peter's "no" welled up from deep within him. An observant Jew, Peter had spent a lifetime trying to remain ritually clean. His "no" to the heavenly buffet invitation was the visceral, reactive, reflexive result of years of religious discipline.

It takes a bit for Peter to understand that the blanket is so much more than a bizarre buffet from heaven – It takes him a bit to understand - that it **is a promise of God's unimaginable generosity**. God's blanket was blotting out the boundary between Jew and Gentile, a boundary that God found unnecessary. What God had made clean was clean indeed. But the thought of crossing that boundary and being among the unclean was repulsive to Peter.

Tradition and laws around ritual cleanliness had made table fellowship with the Gentiles strictly taboo in Peter's time. For Peter, Gentiles were as unclean as the weird cuisine in the dream. Peter refused God's invitation to get up and eat, three times. Peter remained frozen, at least at first.

You see, Peter was part of fashioning the early church. He was part of a young group of followers of Jesus, who were trying to figure out how to be God's people together. They were trying to figure out their committee structures and who would chair the board. They were trying to sort out meeting times and a budget and what their mission statement would be. They had a thousand decisions to make and they were living in a **new time**

– the time beyond Jesus earthly life, a time they didn't understand - a time that was ripe with distractions and dangers.

One of the decisions that needed to be made was to decide who could be a part of this new church and who would not - who was in and who was out. And Peter was convinced that Gentles were out – it was what he knew, it was what he was taught. The boundary was clear for him.

Aren't we all bound by our traditions sometimes – how many times have we said no to new experiences, new ways of thinking, new possibilities because they do not fit into what we know and what we know to be comfortable?

Just when Peter thought he had it all together, God challenged him to see differently. **God challenged Peter, if you will, to feed the wolf of life. Of kindness, generosity, truth, compassion and love.** And not the wolf of Death. Of anger, greed, arrogance, pride and fear.

What wolf are you feeding these days?

As we emerge from these two years of Covid and the impacts of this time, we are creating something new – just like Peter – we are creating our lives in a new world. And we have a thousand decisions to make. We are making decisions about how to spend our time and energy. Many are choosing to look for new work, some are redirecting their volunteer time, some are taking up new hobbies. Some are ending unhealthy relationships and making mental health a priority. **We are experiencing the lowering of God's heavenly blanket and God's promise of unimaginable generosity.** We are moving beyond those things that we have known,

moving beyond our traditional ways of being and it is a bit frightening out here and there is no **right** way to do be out here. All we know for sure is that God is moving us beyond our old boundaries.

So how do we manage or move into this new time? Like Peter we dream, and we think deeply and push the edges we know – we walk with our community and open ourselves to new experiences and we lean into the God of life. Of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.

We feed the wolf of life.

Let me tell you a story about another member of the wolf family.

A Golden Retriever named Bailey. Bailey is as lovely and true and kind as any best friend a family could ever have. An indoor/outdoor dog, Bailey spends most of her time on a porch enclosed especially for her.

From this porch perch Bailey presides over all the goings-on in the wooded back yard. She also enjoys the freedom to slip through a doggie door whenever it suits her fancy, to chase a squirrel or answer nature's call. But there are boundaries to Bailey's realm. Bailey is not allowed outside of the backyard. For beyond the backyard are many things to worry about - getting lost or hurt or even caught by the dreaded dogcatcher.

Now Bailey's family could have built a traditional fence around their yard, but that would have ruined the wooded feel of the grounds. So, instead, they used an invisible fence, one designed specifically to contain

canines. The invisible fence kept Bailey on the grass portion of the backyard.

An invisible fence has two components: a wire buried along the desired boundary and a dog collar that sounds whenever the boundary is approached. Bailey learned the boundary in three ways. First, she had the visual cue of the edge of the grass. Second, she had the audible cue from the collar whenever she approached the buried boundary. And, finally, Bailey could count on a mildly unpleasant tingling sensation from the collar whenever she actually crossed over. So with practice and conditioning, Bailey learned to stay in the backyard.

The invisible fence kept her bound for many years until the blizzard of January 2011. Snowmageddon, as the media called it, shut down the city for a week. A telephone call came from a neighbor at about 9:30 in the morning, the first day of the blizzard. Bailey had escaped.

Why this time and not on other snow days? Well, this time school had closed. And that morning children were whizzing down the best sledding run in the neighborhood, which happens to be located in the side yard, just beyond the invisible fence. The **blanket of snow from the heavens** obscured the boundary of the yard, as it had on other snow days. But what caused Bailey to cross the boundary that day? It was children at play.

As was true for Peter, and is true for me, and is true for you, it is the experience of community, of joy – of freedom – of children, in this case, that caused Bailey and causes us to go beyond our boundaries.

Bailey crossed over what bound her, she was happy and carefree, romping and running and chasing the sleds as they sped along. Bailey found a new life. I think that life is a lot like the life God images for us on the other side of our invisible fences.

In our own lives, in the life of our churches, in the life of our very polarized society, Jesus calls us to cross invisible fences that wall us off from life.

We are invited to feed from God's blanket of life. Of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith

May our God, whose love exceeds all imagination, help us cross over the invisible fences that separate us, from each other and which keep us from life anew.

Together let us feed the wolf of life.

Amen

## Acts 11:1-18

11 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> “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. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ <sup>8</sup> But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> The 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. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>17</sup> If 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?” <sup>18</sup> When 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.”

*May God bless to our understanding and our living these words of Scripture. Amen*