

TAKE THE AVOCADO AND GO

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
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But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 11:9)

One day last month I agreed to help Stacie at the grocery store. Mind you, my help consists of carrying things home, not making any decisions about what the family will eat. So in the produce department of Whole Foods, Stacie instructed me to stay in one place with the cart and not touch anything. Meanwhile, she would run around with the list, pull things from the shelves, and bring them back to the cart. It just goes faster that way. Standing there with time on my hands I noticed a man by the avocado display. Strangely, he would pick up one avocado, then put it down, then pick it up, the same avocado over and over again. At one point he put the avocado in his cart and wheeled away, only to return and put it back. Then he picked it up and put it down, again and again.

Having worked in mental health years ago, my guess was that the man suffers from severe Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or OCD. OCD is an anxiety ailment in which people find themselves obsessed by thoughts that something terrible is going to happen. The notion may be a vague sense of dread or a specific premonition of certain doom. Either way, people with OCD live in fear that they themselves will unwittingly unleash a chain reaction of events that will result in their worst nightmare coming to pass. If they are thinking the negative thought as they walk through a door, or switch off a light, or pick up an avocado, their compulsion is to go back and do it over again. It doesn't matter how many times it takes, they can't move on until they complete the task without the thought. Obviously, a high degree of magical thinking is involved that ascribes cosmic significance to the most ordinary of daily actions. Last month in Whole Foods I inwardly grieved for the man caught in a repetitive ritual in the produce department. He might have remained immobilized there for hours.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts (11:1-18) we hear the Apostle Peter tell the story of how the Spirit of God freed him from a particular place of immobility. Peter is perhaps the best known of the disciples who walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Throughout the Gospels we see that Peter was impulsive, opinionated, and fiercely loyal. He was a fisherman when Jesus first called him to follow, so I've always imagined him to be more of a rugged outdoorsman than someone concerned with keeping his fingernails clean.

Nevertheless, Peter was an observant Jew who abided by the Law of Moses as his people interpreted it at the time. Apparently, he was quite fastidious in his keeping of the Law's finer points. Certain foods and people were unclean. Then as now, Jews were not to eat pork, shellfish, or insects. They were not to mix meat and dairy. Concerning unclean people, certain types of sinners always qualified, but at the top of every list would be the Gentiles – any non-Jew. Could a Gentile share in the promises that God had made to Israel? Many scholarly, conservative Jews thought it was highly unlikely. Therefore, it was best simply to avoid the Gentiles as much as possible or you could become unclean yourself and risk God's displeasure. What is more, since you could never entirely be sure you hadn't slipped up, the practice of regular ritual purification was the smart way to stave off divine wrath.

The Book of Acts, as you likely know, tells the story of the early church in the years immediately following the Resurrection. The Christian movement, or, the Way, as it was called, was straining to expand beyond its origins. Would the Christ followers be merely a small, local sect of Judaism in Jerusalem, or would they be the way God reached out to the known world throughout the Mediterranean? Certain individuals would be key. Saul of Tarsus was one of them. Peter was another. If Peter remained immobilized where he was, as a slave to the local rules and rituals of a particular people, the spread of the Gospel would be hindered. But if Peter could be loosed from specific attitudes that confined him, then the Spirit of God would be able to work powerfully through him to reach the Gentile world with the good news of Jesus.

Today we've heard the story of Peter's vision as he prayed in the city of Joppa. He saw *something descending, like a great sheet let down from heaven by four corners*. Inside he saw *animals and beasts of prey and reptiles*. Essentially, inside the sheet was everything Jews were not supposed to eat. But Peter heard a voice commanding him to do just that. Peter protested: "*By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*" But the voice of the Lord declared, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" The Book of Acts tells two versions of the same incident. The other account (10:9-23) reveals that Peter was perplexed by the meaning of the vision. Eventually he realized that God was releasing him from the narrow definitions of what was clean. God was erasing the distinction between clean and unclean. Thus, Peter could move on in the mission to the Gentiles, specifically, to the house of a man named Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile, a soldier in the Roman army. God's desire was that he, too, should share in the promises made to Israel.

Move on, Peter. Go to Cornelius. Dine with the Gentiles. The new command of the Lord was entirely consistent with what he had heard from Jesus at the last supper (John 13:31-35): "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" What God cares about is that we love one another. What God does not care about are religious dietary regulations, head coverings, vestments, and ritual washings of cups, kettles, pots, and pans. The notion that we can control the mind and mystery and majesty of God with our rituals is magical thinking. I will stop short of using the term mental illness, but we are pushing up against it. Move on. You are free. You are released. Take the avocado and go. Dine with the Gentiles, Peter. Let them serve you a bacon cheeseburger. Eat it, and tell them about Jesus.

The new freedom in Christ sounds like a powerfully attractive offer, doesn't it? In the same vein St. Paul would later write to the Galatians (3:28) that in Christ *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. Even still, as much as we might agree intellectually with the way God sees the human family, we have a tough time moving on. Distinctions of race, religion, class, and sexuality sharply divide us. Why do we get stuck in the old way? We get stuck for all sorts of reasons. The old way is what we know. It's the status quo – simply the way things are. Fear and anxiety play a part, as does a certain degree of magical thinking that our own rituals have the power to unlock the blessings of God. We continue, therefore, making much of distinctions that cannot matter much to God: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.

Or how about Episcopalian and Baptist? During Holy Week I was attending a service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. As you may know, the cathedral is the largest in the world even though it's only about two-thirds complete. As I was sitting there looking at the rough unfinished portions I imagined that if I had a billion dollars to spare I'd be tempted to get the job done. Apparently, a century ago the diocese did indeed have such an offer. In the 1920s, the steel and railroad magnate John D. Rockefeller, Jr. approached the Bishop of New York at the time, William Thomas Manning. Rockefeller said that he would provide all the funds (and all the steel)

to complete the construction of what was being billed as a house of prayer for all people. All he wanted in return was to be made a trustee of the cathedral. Bishop Manning declined. Why? Because Rockefeller was a Baptist. Manning didn't think it was appropriate for a Baptist to be a trustee of the Episcopal cathedral. So Rockefeller moved on to build – and finish – Riverside Church, while St. John the Divine remains incomplete, probably forever.

In defense of Bishop Manning, my guess is that he was concerned about identity and purity. Concerning identity, St. John the Divine was to be the Episcopal cathedral administered by Episcopalians. Concerning purity, it was to be built entirely of structural stone, not a mixture of stone and Rockefeller's steel. Likewise, the Jews were concerned about identity and purity. They were fearful that if they did not maintain the rituals that set them apart as a people, they would simply be absorbed into the great ocean of humanity. The tension that Peter experienced when trying to process the meaning of his vision is one that is known to every people, in every place and time. It is the tension between identity and relevance. On the one hand, we can choose to guard our identity so jealously that we become irrelevant: a curiosity to some, an annoyance to others. On the other hand, we can try so hard to be relevant to an ever-changing world that we lose the anchor we have in our identity. We become indistinguishable from the world we are trying to reach, and therefore have nothing unique to say. As the Spirit of the living God impels us forward, our challenge is always to walk the fine line between identity and relevance.

Tradition and ritual can be deadly if we think that somehow, magically, their practice controls God. But tradition and ritual can be life giving if they remind us of who and whose we are, and if we practice them to give thanks for the love of God. Last month the celebrations of Passover and Easter coincided. Our Jewish brothers and sisters did what they did not to stave off the anger of God, but to give thanks for the love of God that brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Likewise, we Christians gathered here on Easter Day not because God required it, not because God would be angry if we didn't. No, what we did on Easter Day and do every Sunday is give thanks for the love of God that raised Jesus from the dead and brought the whole creation out of death into life. Hopefully you're here – kneeling, standing, sitting, praying – not because you have to be here, but because you want to be here.

When I was growing up, every evening my mother prepared a hearty meal for the family to enjoy. I remember lots of Shake & Bake chicken, Cheez Wiz macaroni, tuna casseroles, and Jell-O molds. I also remember that during one period of time she decided that Thursday nights would be different. We would eat in the dining room, not the kitchen. My mother would make a gourmet meal. She would shop for the ingredients that day and if she brought me along I would carry them home. We would use the fine china and light candles. My father would stack LPs of Mozart and Beethoven on the stereo. It had to be Mozart and Beethoven, we did not know why. We did not ask why. It was the way.

The Thursday dinners were extra work for everyone, especially the washing of cups, kettles, pots, and pans at the end of it. But we did those things not because we had to do them, rather, because we wanted to do them. I have incredibly fond memories of those Thursday nights. To this day I give thanks for the conversations we had, the bonds we established, and the intangible good we accomplished through the ritual of treating each other as if we were honored guests.

Sometimes, a gourmet dinner is what it takes to call everyone to a higher level, even into the closer presence of God. At other times, guacamole and chips will do. In all things, remember, what God cares about is that we love one another. *What God has made clean, we must not call profane.*"