

Fifth Sunday of Easter, New Testament, Year C

GOD-WASHED

Acts 11:1-18

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Marcus Felde

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

Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17If 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?" 18When 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.

DIAGNOSIS: But They're Dirty!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): "But they're dirty!"

I remember watching (in PNG) an Australian newscast back when Nelson Mandela became Prime Minister of South Africa. The reporter put a microphone in front of ordinary people on the street and asked them what they thought about developments. One white lady was having a rough time with the notion that black South Africans might soon become present all around her. She averred that what bothered her about black people was not that they were bad. Heavens! She knew better! She knew some good ones! "But they're dirty!" (Imagine a face full of distaste.) Wow. Such a deeply ingrained conviction must have underlain the thinking of the early Christian leaders who were mortified at the thought that being part of the body of Christ might make them "one body" with people whose bodies were, in their eyes, intrinsically dirty. So when they heard about this taking place, they challenged Peter on the issue. (I don't think "criticized" gives the right flavor of "hesitancy" or "doubt." I think they didn't want it to be true and were not sure, so they wanted to get clear.)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Old Soap

The soap of the old covenant, the soap of circumcision, was clearly what these leaders were relying on to make them really confident that they didn't stink. It was their default, their

go-to deodorant, what made them “sure.” But there were cracks in this confidence. It might not be the thing. Was it really adherence to the law of God which made them acceptable to God and kept them clean? Peter had shared their doubts, they knew, about “unclean” people.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Damned Spot

Their fear, which is not on full display in this reading but is clearly implied, is that there is no salvation for those who are not clean. Only those who have “clean hands and a pure heart,” after all, could ascend the Lord’s holy hill.

PROGNOSIS: God-Washed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Spirit-Bathed

It hit Peter like a thunder bolt, this memory that Jesus had said that “John (the washer) had washed with water, but Jesus’ followers would be washed with the Holy Spirit. Peter needed no other authority, when he witnessed the washing with his own eyes. God had washed/saved these people. What God had “washed” or “made clean,” Peter could in no way call unclean.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Looking to Be Saved

Instructed to seek salvation through a message which would be delivered to them by Peter, they “followed the star” to Joppa (amazingly, the port from which reluctant Jonah had departed to flee the Lord so he wouldn’t have to share gospel with the unwashed of another day and age) and received what they sought by faith.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): “Hier stehe ich; ich kann’ nicht anders.”

Like Luther “sticking to his guns” at Worms, Peter stuck to his guns when criticized for letting the gospel loose; the world would never be the same. The phrase “cleansing tide” didn’t make

it into many hymns you and I know (it occurs in several of other traditions), but we, too, sing “At the Lamb’s high feast we sing praise to our victorious king who has washed us in the tide flowing from his wounded side.” The world—every person in the world—is welcome here. Alleluia!