

**Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman -- May 18, 2025**

**Acts 11: 1-18**

**How To Keep Safe From Loveless Religion**

One of the things people turn to religion for is a sense of grounding. There is more than simply comfort in the familiarity of hymns you know by heart and prayers you could say in your sleep. There is more than simply comfort in entrusting yourself to rituals which are sturdy enough to hold you, to hold the weight of your gratitude or of your hope or of your pain in those times in life when your legs all but give way beneath you: when you *need* a baptism or a wedding or a funeral to be what it is, what it is and always has been, when you can't think or plan or process (or shouldn't think or plan or process), but can only (or should only) be present to the enormity and momentousness of what you are feeling and trust-fall into traditions which have stood the test of time. There is more than comfort in this.

Religion is a stabilizing force. It provides structure, real structure, real *inner* structure, when a flood of feelings, good or bad, threatens to so overwhelm you as to wash you away. And in this, religion keeps you safe. Religion keeps us safe. There is wonderful, new research on the surprising – surprising maybe only to the secular academics running these studies that confirm what most of their grandmothers could have told them – there is wonderful, new research on the surprising *positive* and pro-social effects of churchgoing on our happiness, our marriages, our health and mental health. In measurable, scientifically demonstrable ways, religion keeps us safe. So this morning's scripture reading is one that most of us probably won't know quite what to do with, because this morning's scripture reading is one that shows religion to be a source of *disorientation*, instability, unpredictability, confusion, and unsettling change.

This morning's scripture reading is one we might pretend isn't in the bible – were it not repeated, in some instances, word for word, *twice*. This morning's scripture reading from Acts chapter 11 is Peter's retelling of what happened to him in Acts chapter 10: He, Peter, an observant Jew who kept kosher, that is, who didn't eat things like pork or shellfish, because the Torah, the religious rules-and-regs given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai forbade it, Peter had a vision of a sheet or a kind of canopy being lowered from heaven filled with shrimp cocktail and ham sandwiches.

I'm not sure how to picture this, as, like, a Sizzler (do those still exist?), as a Sizzler-style all-you-can-eat-buffet or as a giant charcuterie board coming down from the clouds, but Peter saw it, and heard a voice, a voice that was undeniably God's own voice, telling him, "*Bon appétit*." Peter, again, an observant Jew who kept kosher, said, "No way, José. I didn't let the trays of scallops wrapped in bacon pass me by at every cocktail party I've ever been to for nothing."

But again the voice, which, this time, maybe, was coming from a big cheeseburger (also not kosher), from a big talking cheeseburger, the voice said, "Eat me." But Peter, stubbornly obedient Peter, put his fingers in his ears and said, "I can't hear you. I can't hear you." A *third* time, the voice said, "I am God. I am the God of the bible. And I am God *over* the bible. I make the rules. And I break the rules. I don't care that I told you before not to eat these carnitas, that I

made lightning flash and the earth shake when I told you before not to eat these carnitas (for emphasis, you know); I don't care that I told you before not to eat these carnitas and threatened to afflict you with pestilence, with (and I quote) with "boils, scurvy, and itch, ...with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind" if ever you were to eat these carnitas. I am telling you now, one last time: Eat these carnitas *or else*. I am God. With me, nothing is sacred. With me, not even what *is* sacred is sacred." So Peter relented.

And with that, a lifetime of religious obedience and a thousand years of religious tradition was thrown to the wayside. In this morning's scripture reading, Peter, formerly good, devout Jewish Peter, tells this strange story to his still good, devout Jewish friends, for word had gotten back to them that Peter – that *Peter*; this is Peter we're talking about, not, like, some benched, second-stringer of an apostle no one has ever heard of before, Alan or something – word had gotten back to them that Peter had sat down at a table with uncircumcised, Gentile, that is, non-kosher, non-Jewish barbarians and that it was Peter – Peter! – who cut the ham.

"Say it ain't so!" said one. "Blasphemy! Sacrilege!" cried another. "First, he says it's just eating with these uncircumcised heathens, but it's a slippery slope; mark my works, the next thing you know he'll be saying *circumcision shmircumcision*. He's going to be Lucy-and-the-football-ing us on ritual circumcision, too!" Which, as it happens, is indeed what Peter goes on to do. Peter, soon to be joined by Paul, sets in motion a process that will culminate in a widescale and traumatic break with the past, with the traditions of the past, with the piety of the past, with the theology of the past.

(As an aside: this process amounted to, essentially, the de-Jewish-izing of Jewish religion in certain key respects, and the birthing of the Church. There was a separating of Jewish religious beliefs from Jewish religious practices. Christianity got the Jewish religious beliefs in the divorce, and Judaism the Jewish religious practice. Which is why we don't keep kosher and I don't come to your homes to ritually circumcise your sons. And why there are synagogues full of ritually circumcised, kosher-keeping atheists.)

I said that it's Peter who sets this process in motion. But, more accurately: It's *God*. It's God who sets this process in motion. God throws Peter, and through Peter, God throws God's people a curveball. God changes things up on them. God *changes*. What else do you call it when God comes to you and commands you to do what He had previously commanded you *not* to do?

But, almost by definition, *changing* is something that God isn't supposed to do! God is supposed to be the constant beneath all change. God is supposed to be our Rock; what does it mean when the Solid Rock rocks you? How do you live like this? How do you know how to be faithful, how to be a good person, if God changes the rules on you, if what God says counts as goodness and faithfulness one day isn't the same as what God says counts as goodness and faithfulness the next? How do you trust a God you can't trust? (You can start to see the appeal of fundamentalism.)

I would say, starting with the simplest scriptural affirmation: God is love. And as anyone who has ever loved anyone else knows, love, deep, real love is both ever-changing and never-changing. Mysteriously, paradoxically, love is both ever-changing and never-changing. So,

too, equally mysteriously and paradoxically, God, the God who *is* love, is both ever-changing and never-changing. When what love requires is unchangingness, God is unchanging. But when what love requires is change, God changes. Now, it's fair to ask: Can you trust in that? A moving target of changing and unchanging divine love? Is the swirling stability and instability of love solid enough to build a faith on and a life on? I would say: Yes. It is the only thing strong enough.

God is made of love, not of stone. The temptation to turn from the loving God, the living God, the loving, living God, to an idol carved of stone, to a hard, unchanging rock that is rock enough to cling to, is the oldest temptation of all. There *is* stability and security in a cold, lifeless, granite god, in a god who stays where you put it, in a god who gives nothing but who asks nothing, in a god who is always and only god as you know and need god to be.

An idol, even an idol of the mind, is a good, dependable thing. But an idol cannot love. One of the things religion has to keep us safe from is loveless religion, is loveless, lifeless religion, which will only leave us loveless and lifeless. Religion has to keep us safe from religion with loveless, lifeless idols at the center of it.

It does this by giving us a bible, a bible which shows us that sometimes the bible must be set aside; the bible cannot become an idol. It does this by refusing to let us make the past more real or more glorious than the future, than God's future; tradition cannot become an idol. (The most idolatrous words spoken in any church are: "*Well, we used to...*") It does this by denying us absolute certainty.

I say it a lot: The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. With the Living God, with the God who is Love, with the God who is Mystery, with the God whose name is I AM WHO I AM – there is no certainty. Worshiping this God ends up being pretty good practice for life. Because nothing is certain in life, least of all love. You can't know for certain that someone you love won't stop loving you, that they won't wound you or betray you or abandon you.

So what are you going to do? Just not love, never love? Nothing made of love – not God, not a marriage, not a friendship, not a child – nothing made of love can give you absolute certainty. Living with uncertainty is the price we pay, that religion lets us practice paying and grow less anxious about paying, for the joy and wonder of love. Living with uncertainty is the price we pay for having open hearts and open minds, without which there is no love.