

May 18, 2025
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C
The Baptism of Mackenzie Grace Ciampa
Acts 11:1-18
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Welcome

It started with dancers. It started with West Coast Swing dancers, to be specific. For years and years, I have avoided clicking on the “Reels” that pop up on my Facebook page. I don’t know why I avoided them, maybe I recognized that they would be just another time sink, in a life that doesn’t have time to sink, so I resisted the lure of those seconds-long snippets of video, until I saw the dancers.

I happen to love watching ballroom dancing, and especially swing dancing. It’s something I wish I could do but have never had the time or the skill to pursue. So, one day, with a little more time on my hands than usual, or perhaps just no energy to do anything else, I clicked on one of the videos and was introduced to West Coast Swing. And then one thing led to another.

I have no idea how a social media algorithm took me from West Coast Swing dancing to through a series of wedding and prom dress try-ons and comedians, but somehow I found myself watching a couple of Orthodox Jewish content creators telling us what their lives were like, kind of demystifying their lifestyle as Orthodox Jews, how they dress, how they eat, how they raise their children. They take questions from the comments on their videos and answer them with more videos.

I don’t regret clicking on that first “Reel” a few months ago, and especially not this week as I was preparing for this sermon, because, thanks to those Orthodox Jewish content creators I have a much better sense of what was happening in our first reading for today.

Those content creators have made it very clear how important, how vital, how life defining the Jewish dietary laws they have to follow are to them. The

kosher laws are central to their identity as Jews, they design their meals, their homes, their lives around them. And there are a lot of moving pieces involved in keeping ancient laws in a modern world. The laws define where they can shop, where they can eat out, what dishes they use and when, and how they move through their own kitchens.

One of the content creators whose videos I have watched is a rabbi and he has talked about how he has spent his entire life studying this topic, the minutia of how to follow these laws, like what happens if you eat a meat dish on a dairy plate or how to make a plate or a pot or a microwave kosher that hadn't been kosher from the beginning.

It can sound very complex, but, of course, for people who have been following these laws for their whole lives, who have learned how to follow them from their parents and grandparents and religious community, it is as natural and self-evident as breathing. The case they make to their largely non-Jewish audience is, "This is what we need to do to live as the people we were meant to be in the world." They are not defending their way of life, just explaining it to people who might not have much experience or understanding about this different culture.

One of the content creators I have watched compared the keeping the kosher laws to having an allergy. She said that eating certain foods or certain foods together isn't inherently bad, it is fine for people who aren't Jewish to eat foods that are forbidden for Jews to eat or to mix meat and dairy meals. Non-Jews are not bound by Jewish dietary laws, but from her perspective, foods that might be fine for non-Jews to eat or to mix are bad for Jews, it's like they cause a spiritual allergic reaction.

The parallel she drew was that someone who doesn't have a peanut allergy can safely eat as many peanuts as they want, but for someone who does have a peanut allergy, eating just one peanut can have deadly consequences. For her, keeping a strictly kosher home and diet was as essential for her and her family

spiritually as avoiding an allergen would be physically for someone with a food allergy.

I have always understood and respected the commitment of observant Jewish people to keeping kosher, and I have even understood to a certain extent the value of having such structure around food and meals, so that you cannot consume a bite of food without thinking about God and your relationship with God before you do—the question being, would consuming this food at this time draw me closer in obedience to God or push me farther away.

Even though I have always understood on a surface level the commitment that Orthodox Jews have to keeping kosher, perhaps this year, through these videos that I been pushed toward by an algorithm I barely understand, I have a deeper understanding of the intensity of what is going on in our reading from Acts for today, because unless you understand what's going on in Acts chapters 10 and 11 in terms of centrality of the kosher laws for Jewish identity, you might miss how extraordinary the transformation that we see happening here is.

In Acts, chapter 10, we hear a story of central importance in the formation of the church. It is the story of two visions. At the beginning of Acts 10, a gentile man named Cornelius, who was part of the Roman army, experienced a vision of the angel of God telling him to send someone to go to Joppa and find a man named Peter and bring him to him.

The next day Peter, who was in Joppa, was hungry. He had gone up onto the roof to pray and some food, no doubt, kosher food, was being prepared for him. While he was waiting for his lunchtime meal, for this all took place around noon, Acts 10 tells us that Peter fell into a trance and had a vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven. On the sheet were all kinds of animals to eat, but they were not clean, they were not kosher, four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds of the air.

And a voice from heaven spoke to Peter, saying, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.” (Acts 10:13)

But Peter was an observant Jew, and he knew that he was not supposed to eat what was on the sheet. So, he refused, saying, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” (Acts 10:14)

And the voice said to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:15)

This dialogue happened three times, with Peter never obeying the voice and killing and eating what was on the sheet. But then, after the sheet with the unclean animals was taken back up into heaven, the men who had been sent by Cornelius came and found Peter, and the Spirit told Peter, “Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation, for I have sent them.” (Acts 10:19-20)

So, Peter went and met with the men, who were gentiles and agreed to go with them to meet Cornelius, who had sent them, in the city called Caesarea, which means, of course, it was a gentile city, named after Caesar.

When he got there Cornelius asked him to tell him and his household about Jesus, which Peter did, and while he was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on the Cornelius and his household and Peter called for them to be baptized. These were the first gentile converts in the church, and they caused quite an identity crisis in the early church, because what Peter did next was stay with them for several days, and while he stayed with them he ate with them. And, obviously these gentiles, these Romans, did not keep a kosher table.

So, what Peter had said earlier that very day, that he had never broken the kosher laws, that he had never eaten anything profane or unclean, became untrue. God had called the gentile believers clean, worthy, invited, accepted, and Peter sat down at their table and ate with them.

And the Jewish believers in Judea and Jerusalem freaked out when they heard about it. The story I just told you came from Acts chapter 10. Our reading from Acts today is from chapter 11. In it, Peter has been called back to Jerusalem to answer for himself, to explain why he has done what he has done, for what he has done is broken Jewish religious law, a central part of Jewish identity. And at that time followers of Jesus, who they believed was the Jewish messiah, did not understand themselves to be in any way separate from Judaism. And if someone from outside of Judaism, a gentile, wanted to become a Jew, one of the first things that they were expected to do was to keep the Jewish dietary laws.

So, what was Peter playing at? “Why did [he] go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:3)

And then, Peter tells the story of what happened to him in Joppa, the whole vision with the sheet and the unclean animals that had already been described in detail in chapter 10. If you weren’t paying close attention you might think, when reading chapter 11 of the book of Acts that you had lost your place in the Bible and were reading chapter 10 again. Then he told them how he met Cornelius and his household, how the Holy Spirit descended on them, and how they were baptized. And the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, celebrated, that the gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, that God’s salvation was for all.

Sometimes, when I’m watching those videos about being Orthodox, about keeping kosher laws and sabbath laws, I think that how much those laws, that structure, must help people stay true to their faith. With every bite they eat, with how they dress, with how they keep their time, they are thinking about God and relationship with God and obedience to God.

As Christians, we don’t have much that is mandated that is similar. We have weekly communal worship, we have daily prayer, but there’s a lot of our time that can be considered to be secular and not sacred, if we let it, and there aren’t the same kinds of laws binding us or structuring us. We’re allowed to eat whatever we want;

we can talk to whoever we want, we can sit down at anyone's table. Which can be seen as a very good thing. Freedom. But we what we lose in rules, we also lose in structure. For Jews who follow kosher laws, they have a very clear idea of what it means to live their faith, to be faithful to God.

For us, without those kinds of specifics, it can be a little less clear, a little less decisive.

But if the story of Acts 10 and 11 tells us anything, it tells that that what is central to being is Christian is that God's love, God's welcome, God's Spirit is for all, and we are called to live with that kind of welcome and love in our own lives. That's what the Christian life is supposed to look like.

It's supposed to look like love that seeks the face of God in all faces, love that welcomes the stranger, love that washes feet, love that serves. Love that is not bound by rules, but that seeks the voice of God sending us into unexpected places, to people that the world might have deemed unworthy or unwelcome.

It's a little less clear than hard and fast rules. It's a little messy. It can get confusing, and it can lead to us sitting at tables we might never have expected. But that's where God led Peter, and what caused the believers in Jerusalem to rejoice and say with amazement, "Then God has given even to gentiles the repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:18)

Today we have the honor and privilege of welcoming Mackenzie Grace into the same family into which Peter welcomed Cornelius and his household. Today we have the honor and privilege of praying for the presence of the Holy Spirit in her life and surrounding her with the trust that Jesus will be with her forever.

With that honor and privilege comes the responsibility to teach her even as we learn, again and again, even as we teach each other, what it means to be a Christian and a Christian community, to be people who listen to God's spirit, who seek fellowship beyond human boundaries, and, who, with Peter, learn never to

say never, because what God calls clean, blessed, and welcome, we must not call profane. Amen.