

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“All Things New”  
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Lessons: Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

The one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”<sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”<sup>1</sup> I am making all things new!

When I first arrived at Green Hill Church, several people explained to me that Green Hill was not afraid of change. I will admit that I doubted those statements. I’ve heard from various “experts” that the only people who like change are babies with a dirty diaper. Churches, like most any organization, generally do not like change, and yet, you have changed and I’ve discovered a truth behind what I was told: Green Hill is in fact open to some change! We are not the same church we were in 1849 or in 1949 or in 2009. Over and again, God has made us new and that is the fulfillment of a gospel promise: I am making all things new. It is done!

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. In the end, God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. We began in a garden and now we finish in the city, the new Jerusalem, with every one of us present—people from every place and background and experience and outlook. They are all there. And there is no pain, no crying, no mourning, no dying. Those things are no more. God makes all things new.

One of the great stories about God making all things new is found in the Book of Acts. It is a story that is so important that it is told twice, first in the tenth chapter of Acts and then all over again in the eleventh chapter. A good editor would have taken one version out. Why tell it twice? Because it is so important that it is worth telling twice and maybe because the church has trouble with the truth behind this story.

It is a story of Peter’s trance, his vision, that led him to a whole new viewpoint. To understand the story, we need to understand Peter’s background. We know he was a fisherman. We know how he was the leader among the disciples, even if sometimes he did not understand what Jesus was trying to explain. He was a faithful Jew and he grew up knowing the laws that are proclaimed in Scripture. He would have known what is proclaimed in Deuteronomy and in Leviticus: “Speak to the people of Israel, saying: From among all the land animals, these are the creatures that you may eat. Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud—such you may eat. But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. The rock badger, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. The hare, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you.”<sup>2</sup> That is God’s clear command. Some food is clean and some food is not and you shall not eat or even touch the food that is unclean. Period. God said it. I believe it. That settles it.

But God is making all things new and Peter, while praying, has a vision. It is described first in Acts, Chapter 10: “About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city,

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 21:5-6

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 11:2-8

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

This vision led Peter to go with Cornelius, who was a Gentile, the kind of person Peter should not have been associating with. He accepted their hospitality which suggests that he also accepted their food and while they were together it was clear that the Holy Spirit fell upon those Gentiles, those outsiders, those unclean people, and Peter went forward and baptized them, welcoming them into the community of faith. It is an amazing story about expanding the boundaries of the early church. Do you remember the poem, *Outwitted*, written by Edwin Markham, the poet laureate of Oregon in the 1920s?

*He drew a circle that shut me out-  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him in!*

Barriers are coming down and by the power of the Holy Spirit the church is expanding to include the most surprising people. The unclean are made clean.

This story is then told all over again, because the first Christians, the original followers, the people who actually spent time with Jesus in the flesh, they knew better than to associate with Gentiles. They knew better than to start eating food that was unclean. They understood what the Scriptures said and they called Peter to task for what he had done with those Gentiles. As John Harvard explains, “It sounds as if he was being called on the carpet for breaking the rules. He had been eating with ‘the uncircumcised.’ It sounds a little bit like the charge that was leveled against Jesus for eating with sinners (Luke 15:2).”<sup>4</sup> So Peter explained to these faithful, original disciples what he had discovered. God has a bigger plan in mind. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” “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?”

I don’t know anyone who wants to be on the side of hindering God. “If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the whole world but to save it, who are we to try to limit the mission of God to redeem humanity?”<sup>5</sup> This story about Peter and Cornelius and the breaking down of barriers, of God making all things new, is an example of living the new commandment that comes from Jesus. Our old distinctions are done away. Things we thought were unclean are made clean by God. The same gifts are given by God to people who are different from us. For most of us here, the only reason we are part of the community of faith is because Peter followed that vision, and Paul followed his lead and the Gentiles were welcomed.

This is a word that continues to be urgent for the church today. Who are the people we continue to call unclean? Who are the people we’ve been taught by our families and our scriptures to stay away from, but who have been made clean by God? What divisions do we continue to erect that keep us away from the people God has now chosen? How might we live the new commandment in

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 10:9-16

<sup>4</sup> John S. Harvard, Acts 11: 1-18 Pastoral Perspective, in *Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, General Editors. Westminster John Knox Press © 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

the world today? The church has a long history of making distinctions, of struggling over who can lead and who cannot, of separating people one from another. In the midst of that division, God is making all things new, bringing together people who on the outside are different but on the inside are all the same: children of God. We have a new commandment from our God to love one another. That's how others will know we are Christ's disciples. So don't ever call unclean what God has made clean. God is making all things new. That is already done.

Let us pray: Help us dear God to live your commandment, that we might love as you love, with reckless abandon, that we might never call unclean what you have made clean, that we might extend your welcome to all people, whoever they are, wherever they are on their journey of faith, that together we might celebrate the grace of God so freely given. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.