

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 19, 2019
The Rev. Scott Walters

Brian volunteered to slaughter the goat. I'm not sure he'd ever cleaned a fish on his own. But we were camping in the bush country of Kenya, and he just had to give it a go.

I'll resist a very vivid description of what followed. Suffice it to say Brian was hilariously unsuccessful, even though two Pokot tribesmen held the goat down, handed him a spear and pointed to the precise spot on the beast's ribcage where the job would be most humanely done.

We were college kids on one of those missionary trips to Africa that may or may not be of much help to the people ostensibly in need. The next day, we were back at the job site, working on a small dam where livestock, like the aforementioned goat, could water through the dry summer months. And even though Pokot was two languages removed from anything we could understand, when one of the Africans would point at Brian and make three weak downward thrusts with an invisible spear, we knew exactly what the men were falling over each other in laughter about. Here was a twenty-year-old American, who stood nearly a head taller than any of them, and he was incapable of killing so much as a goat?

But back to the night of the slaughter. After Brian's failed attempt, the man who had lent him the spear took it back and dispatched the goat with a merciful efficiency. The fire grew larger as darkness fell on the Great Rift Valley. We were told its flames might flash in the eyes of lions who lay not so far off in the bush. True or not, the possibility only added to the raw thrill of the evening.

I tell you all this because I want you to have the fullest picture your imagination can muster of the wildly perfect setting for this once in a lifetime meal, my very first taste of goat liver expertly roasted over an open fire.

I want the scene filled out when I tell you that, unfortunately, the liver of a goat, even on safari in East Africa, is absolutely dreadful stuff. It tastes like the overcooked insole of an old running shoe, and is about that tender. It was almost as revolting as the curdled milk the Kenyans kept in gourds and served at room temperature. Room temperature usually being somewhere in the mid 90s that time of year.

Maybe you can appreciate what a missed opportunity this was for me. The surest way to achieve hipness right now is to rave about an ethnic dish no one else has heard of that you found in some authentic, out of the way place where no one else has ever been. If only goat liver didn't taste so abjectly horrible, I'd be instantly in.

But what a truly strange meal can do, especially one you cannot imagine anyone anywhere could enjoy, is remind us that our tastes are culturally informed. All of them. Even our taste buds. So much of what we like, we've learned how to like, whether from your grandmother or a Wendy's ad or the stoners who hung out behind the gym after school.

So much of what we like, we've learned how to like. And so much of what we find revolting is the nastier underside of the very same process.

Let's remember this about ourselves when we read the strange story in Acts about Peter gaining sudden access to a whole new section on the menu.

Like most of you, I presume, I come to this scene very much as a Gentile. My tastes have been formed by a culture very different from Peter's. So, from the first time I heard this story as a

child, I assumed Peter's trance was unequivocally good news to him. Delectable foods that had long been forbidden are suddenly declared good and clean. That four cornered sheet was laden with things Peter's people never ate but mine always have. So I thought he'd be thrilled that he could now order shrimp cocktail and, even better, a big plate of ribs at Memphis in May.

But this is another story I've been reading from the wrong direction. Look at it again. Here's what Peter says: "I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.'"

This sounds more like an uncomfortable divine order that some lily-white city kid in the African bush must go kill his own goat, roast it up, and wash it down with half a gourd of curdled milk. Peter isn't being offered a taste of a new freedom. He's being ordered to let go of an essential part of his identity.

And not just his culinary identity. Food and religion have been deeply connected from the beginning. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, you may remember, was covered with food that was good to eat, not just blossoms that were pretty to look at. From the tragically different sacrifices of Cain and Abel, to the intricate instructions for the Passover meal, to the Last Supper Jesus ate with his friends, a supper we imitate right here each week, food is almost never just a matter of caloric intake in the Bible. It is laden with culture and history and ritual and rules. Because food matters. Whether it is desirable or revolting, food matters. Because our desires and our revulsions probably have a lot more to do with who we are than our ideas do. And God cares about who you are.

And the story of Peter's vision is a story of one more person whose entire understanding of himself gets disrupted to the core of his being. Food is culture. Food is identity. Food is selfhood conveyed through flavor and smell and fellowship and so much more. And the gift in Peter's learning that for him all foods were clean, was not about making the act of eating simpler. It was about being drawn into communion with people whose ways he was formed to find revolting. It had nothing to do with a reduction in religious demands and everything to do with the even more difficult work of reconciliation across the deepest of human divisions and boundaries that God was somehow still doing after the body of Jesus had left the earth.

Why does it matter to you and to me? People who have been eating shellfish and pork and "cloven foot beasts that chew the cud" for generations by now? What's the big deal for us?

Well, the big deal is this. If what we call faith stays up in our heads, if we think that what Jesus wants to reform and heal in us are our polite and reasonable ideas about what is good and beautiful and true, we're just not in the same gospel story. In fact, when the word "heart" conjures for me a red emoji on my phone, it might be time to let it rest for a while as a Christian term for who we are. Because God wants to go deeper down.

God still wants to heal our revulsions, or to call us to a reconciled life out beyond them. God wants to work in those places in us where we can't just decide to feel different about the way things are.

It might not be a bridge too far to say God wants to heal the place in me where my gag reflex lives. Because that's where any fracture in my relationship with you will almost certainly begin. Especially if you're some strange sort of creature who's been formed by a story and a culture I just can't understand.

I still haven't developed a taste for the roasted liver of an African goat, but I'm telling you about it 30 years after I tried. Clearly the strange tastes of these strangers made an impact.

The challenge from them and from the story of Peter's trance that I hope God will lodge in my gut is a reminder that our loves and our revulsions will always be imperfect, incomplete, misguided. But they can be made a little more whole over time. Not made more whole in our heads, but in our bodies. In our bellies. At a table. Of course it would be at a table. Hasn't it always been at tables where our laughter and our worries, our incomprehensions and bad taste are all welcome, that the flesh and blood reconciliation of Jesus begins?