

Let's be clear about the difference. Jesus was a Jew. Jews were both a religion and a race – but in reality, that was a difference without a distinction in Jesus' day. Gentiles were, if you were Jewish, anyone who was not a Jew. While Jews worshipped the God of Abraham, Gentiles worshipped various household gods (with a lowercase “g”) or no gods at all.

According to Jewish tradition, and as a way to set themselves apart and maintain their identity through a number of exiles, Jews were circumcised – much as we are baptized as a way to mark us as Christian.

In the first century, as the Good News of Jesus Christ spread, and more and more believed him to be the salvation of the world, the question arose among the leaders of The Way – did Gentiles have to be first Jewish, be circumcised, before they could join The Way as followers of Jesus.

And then, the Holy Spirit intervened. Hungry, Peter had a dream about food. Now the Jewish people held to strict dietary laws marking some foods clean and acceptable to eat, and some unclean – unacceptable. In Peter's dream, clean and unclean foods descended on a tablecloth. Get up and eat, Peter is told – and when he balks at eating forbidden food, he hears, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Shortly after, Peter had dinner in a Gentile household and was widely criticized, much like Jesus was criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners and anyone who was not Jewish.

Here, again, the Holy Spirit is at work – as the Holy Spirit always is. Called to Caesarea, Peter recounts, “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” And to the Gentile household whom the Spirit told to send for Peter, “he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.” Upon his arrival, Peter watched as the Holy Spirit fell upon these Gentiles just as it had fallen upon the apostles. Now, Peter concludes, “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.” And those who had criticized Peter praised God saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Peter, who had for his whole life separated food and people into two piles – clean and unclean – is now able to see God's plan for salvation in a new way. Not just salvation for one race of people, but for all people.

We call what Peter did theological reflection. After seeing God's surprising work through the Holy Spirit, Peter takes what he has known and makes a reasoned break with that, embracing something new. The same could be said about Saul, who, knocked off his horse by the booming voice of the Lord, completely changes his way of being from a persecutor of followers of Jesus to being one of the staunchest of followers himself whom we know as Paul.

The Episcopal Church has always been engaged in theological reflection – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. This reflection is rooted in the way we encounter scripture – both what it says and how it relates to our tradition and our reason. It is how we moved to allow women to be ordained priests, how we embrace equality among gender, race, and creed. It was a lack of theological reflection that allowed the Church, especially in RI, to thrive during the slave trade where some of our most beautiful churches were built with its proceeds.

Theological reflection is something we can all engage in. Jesus says to his disciples at the Last Supper, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” and we reflect on what that message means for us. Do we love as Christ loves? Unconditionally – or do we separate people into piles, embracing some and rejecting others? Knowing is important because Jesus known through the way we choose to love our neighbors.

How is the Spirit transforming us? How is the Spirit at work reconciling us to the other and making us all one with God? And, because this is also a very important question, “How are we resisting the Spirit’s transformative power?”

What would have happened to the early Church if Peter had dismissed his dream, dismissed the workings of the Holy Spirit? Could the Church have grown so widely if its mission field was limited to his fellow Jews? I think the answer is obviously “no,” even as I’m confident God would have found another way.

In every age, we see human resistance to each new thing, including the gospel where “everything has become new.” Peter was able to embrace change, shift his own thinking to more align with God’s thinking, and the Church grew and thrived because of this.

The Church still has a long way to go – we have a long way to go – but we have a model in Peter and the early Church – in reflecting theologically with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” for this is the way of inclusion, the Way of Love that is the mark of the Church.

The Church glorifies God by including all God’s children – because we are all created in God’s image – everyone of us – nothing God makes is profane – and neither does God make mistakes.