When God Breaks Our Bias

Acts 11:1–18 / John 13:31–35

Hand Gesture

We live in a world full of different cultures—and with that comes all sorts of cultural differences. What's totally normal in one culture might be considered incredibly rude in another. And one of the best examples of this? Hand gestures. So let me ask: how do you call someone over? Most people do it like this—palm up, fingers curling toward yourself, kind of like a little wave. In the U.S., that's friendly. No big deal. You might use it to call your kid, your dog, or your friend from across the room.

But! If you ever go to Korea or other parts of Asia, don't do that. That same gesture can be seen as rude or even aggressive—like you're picking a fight! It can come across as, *"Bring it on!"* or *"Come at me!"* Totally not what you're trying to say, right? I know some of our church members have actually made that gesture to me—with the biggest smile on their face! (Haha!) Thankfully, I knew they meant well. But it's a great reminder: something as small as a hand gesture can mean totally different things in different cultures.

Every Religion Wears the Clothing of Culture

And here's something important to remember: every religion wears the clothing of culture. Christian faith, too, takes on the shape and language of the cultures it enters—it becomes incarnate in each context. But here's the problem: when our religious customs and cultural traditions turn into prejudices—when they become tools to exclude others—we risk missing God's will altogether.

Today's passage from Acts tells the story of Peter reporting what happened when Cornelius, a Gentile, believed the Word of God and received the Holy Spirit. While Peter was praying in Joppa, he had a strange vision: He saw something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals—including those considered unclean by Jewish law. A voice said, *"Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."* Peter replied, *"No way, Lord. I've never eaten anything unclean."* And the voice responded, *"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."* This happened three times before the sheet was taken back up to heaven.

Now, Peter's response wasn't rebellious—it was actually very normal for a devout Jew of his time. As God's people, the Jewish community had long placed a high value on remaining ritually clean. Over time, purity laws developed to help them distinguish between what was clean and unclean. And their religious and national identity became deeply tied to faithfully following those laws. Peter's vision is about more than food. It reveals how easily we confuse God's holiness with our human boundaries—our traditions, our culture, our assumptions about who belongs and who doesn't. Like Peter, we can mistake ethnic and racial identity for religious faithfulness. But God often interrupts us right at that point.

Mini-Quiz: Are You (Even Just a Little Bit) a White Christian Nationalist?

Before we go any further, let me pause and ask you a few questions. You don't need to answer out loud—just keep track in your mind.

- Do you believe the United States was founded to be a Christian nation?
- Should the government declare the United States a Christian nation?
- Should prayer be allowed in public schools, led by teachers or officials?
- Do you believe America's success depends on obedience to God?
- Do you think the government should promote Christian values?

- Should Christian symbols be displayed on government property?
- Do you feel that being American and being Christian are closely connected?

These questions come from research used by sociologists and theologians to help us recognize the core ideas behind white Christian nationalism. Have you heard of this term before? White Christian nationalism is the belief that the United States is—or should be—a nation for white Christians, and that its laws and culture should reflect a particular version of Christianity tied to white identity and American exceptionalism.

If that definition feels a bit abstract, think about what happened on January 6th at the Capitol. The rioters didn't just carry political signs—they carried crosses, "Jesus Saves" banners, and Christian flags. Some gathered in prayer circles, calling on the name of Jesus as they prepared to storm the Capitol. There were even flags that read, *"Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my President."* This wasn't just random religious expression. It was the use of Christian imagery to justify political violence—a clear and disturbing example of white Christian nationalism in action.

Now, I know that here at Asbury, we don't have anyone waving Christian flags at riots. But—as you might have realized while taking that little quiz—we may still carry within us a tendency toward Christian nationalism without fully recognizing it.

Questions I asked weren't about your love of God or your love of country. They were about how closely we've tied our faith to our national identity, and whether we've started to confuse cultural power with spiritual truth. If you found yourself nodding "yes" to several of these, you're not alone. These beliefs are very common—not just on the political fringes, but even in many church pews. But now we need to ask: do they reflect the gospel—or are they another form of the old mindset Peter had to unlearn?

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So what do we do with all of this? We all carry some kind of bias. Some of it comes from how we were raised, what we've been taught, or what feels safe and familiar. But the good news is—God doesn't leave us there.

Just like Peter, we are invited into something bigger. God breaks open our boundaries. God stretches our hearts. God calls us to love beyond what we thought was possible. And that's exactly what Jesus says in today's Gospel reading: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

That's not just a suggestion for being nice. It's an invitation to cross the lines we've drawn. It's a command to build bridges where walls once stood. It's a calling to see people—not as strangers, or threats, or "them"—but as beloved neighbors and siblings.

There's a beautiful line from a Korean poem that says: "사랑하는 만큼 보여요." "We see to the extent that we love." The poet goes on to say: "People are like that. Just as no one can be good in every way, no one can be completely bad either. We don't see people clearly just because we know them. We see them clearly when we love them."

That's it, friends. When we love, we begin to see. When we love, we stop fearing what's different. When we love, the other is no longer someone to avoid or exclude—but someone made in God's image, someone we're called to welcome.

So may we love—not because it's easy, but because it's the only way to see each other as God sees us. May we allow the Spirit to keep breaking our bias, again and again. And when God breaks our bias, God is widening our vision—so we can see more clearly, love more deeply, and

welcome more fully. May we become a people who don’t guard borders—but open tables. A people who don’t protect privilege—but build beloved community. Amen.