

Scriptures: John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18

### **Peter at Simon the Tanner's house**

Last week we talked about how the passage we read from Acts 9 ends with Peter staying in Joppa at the house of a tanner, named Simon. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, was acutely aware of the racial or ethnic prejudices which existed between the religious Jews, and their Gentile neighbors. Bible scholars believe Luke, a Gentile, spent much time traveling with Paul, who according to his own testimony contained in the Scriptures, was a Jewish Pharisee.

Friends don't think for a minute that prejudice – whether it's based on race, ethnicity, socio-economics, age, gender, lifestyle, or any other type you can possibly imagine – is a new or recent issue. Prejudice against people unlike “us,” has been going on since before the days when Holy Scripture was put down on scrolls. We're going to read about it today, examine how the ancient church responds, and then think about what that means for us now. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Acts 11:1-18. I'll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Acts 11:1-18.**

When the Church first started, roughly 2,000 years ago, it was a pretty exclusive bunch. The earliest followers of Jesus Christ were Jews. Luke opens our text today by telling us, “The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God,” (Acts 11:1). In other words, the Gentiles had heard the Good News – that Christ had come, had died for forgiveness of sin, and three days later had risen. That's great, right? We want to tell the world about Jesus – the Church should want to tell the whole world about what Jesus has done!

### **You Are What You Eat**

But... these apostles and brothers in Judea aren't happy about it. “When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them,’” (verses 2-3). How scandalous! The circumcised believers are Jews, of course, and these guys still have the mindset that following Jesus Christ is an exclusively Jewish thing to do. In those days, it was socially unacceptable for a Jewish person to associate with a non-Jewish person, or as Luke calls them “uncircumcised.”

We tend to call the non-Jewish people from Bible times “Gentiles,” it's a little nicer sounding term I suppose. The Gentiles didn't follow the Jewish customs and laws in the Old Testament. In fact, most of the world in those days followed polytheistic religions. They prayed to trees, the moon, various stars, or maybe a specific landmark, like the Nile River, for instance. So they don't follow the Bible at all. And they sure don't

follow all the food preparation guidelines found in the first five books of the Bible, which Moses had written.

And Peter – a Jew, and a Christian – had been in the houses of some Gentiles in Joppa and Caesarea. When you're at a place for any length of time, what are you going to do? You're going to sleep there. You're going to eat there. So the food the Gentiles are fixing for Peter, and what he's eating in their houses would have been "unclean." Have you heard the saying, "You are what you eat?" If Peter's eating stuff that's "unclean," what's that make Peter? "Unclean!" In other words, he's guilty by association.

### **It All Starts With Prayer**

We heard what happens next. Peter gives an account of how he ended up at Cornelius' house, and how the Gentiles had heard the Word, which all started with Peter being in prayer. "I was in the city of Joppa praying," he tells, "and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was," (verse 5). Peter wasn't dreaming – he's actively praying. He's wide awake, and has this vision, which he's retelling here, after it had been recorded in chapter 10.

Peter sees every kind of animal on this sheet – even animals which would have been "unclean," by Biblical standards found in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus (chapter 11). When God gave those food laws to Moses there were two reasons – to help keep the ancient Israelites healthy, and to keep the Israelites from eating the usual and customary foods people in that area ate as acts of worship to false gods. Pay attention to what happens next. Peter "heard a voice, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat,'" (verse 7). Let's be clear – we know it's Jesus' voice that Peter hears. If you have a Bible with Jesus' words written in red letters, you see that phrase, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat," is in red. That's who's talking to Peter, and he knows it! Look at how Peter responds.

"I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth,' (verse 8). Peter's appalled at the idea of what Jesus has just told him to do – to eat some "unclean" animal. This is hard for us to grasp today. I'm just going to say – for the record – I like pork. Pork chops, ham, sausage, bacon. It's good. Crispy bacon sounds real good, right now, doesn't it? Well, I'm certain one of the animals on that sheet was a hog. They're "unclean" animals according to the Book of Leviticus. You're not supposed to eat them if you're Jewish and following the Jewish faith. Friends, I don't know what heaven's going to be like, but don't expect to catch Peter eating bacon there, okay? He probably won't be eating it.

## **Tetelestai**

This vision of Peter's is actually pretty cool. If you get a chance, just read all of Acts 10. I'm jumping the gun a little bit, but Peter never does what we would expect someone to do if they take God's Word literally – he never kills any of the animals, or eats any of the animals in the vision. “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean,’” (Acts 11:9).

When Jesus went to the cross for us – and for the world – He restored everything to a right relationship with God the Father. It's a done deal. Jesus' last word on the cross – it's in Greek – “Tetelestai,” (John 19:30), means “It is finished.” In the sense that “My work is successfully completed.” Jesus, crying “Tetelestai,” from the cross, makes a statement – that “it [His redemptive work over sin and death causing our separation from God] was finished in the past, is still finished in the present, and will remain finished into eternity.”

John 3:16-21 says: “For God so loved the world that He gave His One and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stand condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's One and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”

Tetelestai – Christ did it, has done it, continues to do it – it's up to people to just accept it. All that is another sermon, in and of itself, and maybe we'll look at it again at another time. The point being, though, is that Jesus didn't come to lay His life aside just for us human beings to carry on doing stuff the same old way we've always done things.

## **God Calls Us Out of Comfort Zones**

Peter tells the ancient church in Jerusalem that Jesus tells him three times to “Kill and eat,” and then the sheet gets pulled back up to heaven (paraphrase of Acts 11:10). There are lots of threes which show up in the Bible – especially with Peter. He denied knowing Christ three times between Maundy Thursday night in the Garden, and the crucifixion on Good Friday. After the Resurrection, Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves Him. And here we see Jesus tell Peter to eat the unclean animals three times. Jesus is reinforcing this idea that if He says something is clean, then it's clean.

When you look back at Acts 10 where this happens, Luke records, “While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out

where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate," (Acts 10:17). This vision of all these various creatures which aren't supposed to be eaten becomes a metaphor for people. In verse 11 of our text, we're told that three men were sent from Caesarea to Peter. Cornelius and the guys he sent to Peter were not Jews. Peter's a Jew – we must not forget that – and there is deep-seated cultural animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles which has been on-going for thousands of years.

What they heard next, and what we read next was that the Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with them to Cornelius' house. That's interesting. The Holy Spirit is continually nudging us out of our comfort zones and into a clearer vision of what He's ultimately reshaping and remolding us into – better image-bearers of God Almighty. Peter goes on to tell the church in Jerusalem what Cornelius had told him – that an angel had appeared in his house and said, "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved," (Acts 11:13-14).

### **Cornelius Needs a Savior**

Why does Cornelius want to hear what Peter has to say? Because he wants to hear about and know Jesus Christ! Cornelius is acutely aware of his own shortcomings, and his need for a Savior. Cornelius needs a Savior. The whole world needs a Savior. And friends, that's what Jesus Christ does. He saves!

There's something else here, which I want to point out, because as a society we've become so culturally fixated on this whole idea of self. Of the individual, and individual rights. Notice what Luke records. Cornelius "and all his household" will be saved. We make a big deal about our faith being individual – and it is, I'm not trying to downplay that – but here we have an instance in Scripture where the head of a family makes a decision to follow Jesus Christ, and the rest of the family comes along into faith in Christ with the family head.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion. He's pretty well off, financially, and in Roman society. It's very likely that Cornelius had servants, or slaves. If you're a slave, and the master decided to follow Jesus Christ, what are you supposed to do? You're also going to follow Jesus Christ. It's a ripple effect. Cornelius believes, so does his family, his slaves, maybe even the soldiers he commands, and so on.

### **Baptism**

Peter tells the church that as he began speaking, "the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning," (verse 15). Peter's talking about the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost, when the disciples of Jesus Christ were in Jerusalem. The story of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost is found in Acts 2. There were all different nationalities of people in Jerusalem that day for a Jewish religious festival. And at 9:00 in the morning, they miraculously heard the Good News of God revealed through the

work of Jesus Christ – in their own native languages. You remember that story, church? Critics at the time said Peter and the other followers were drunk! Critics are always going to find something to criticize!

So Peter recognizes that Cornelius and all his people have received the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and then he remembers something. “Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift as He gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (Acts 11:16-17). What’s Peter do? In Cornelius’ case, after Peter and the others with him saw Cornelius’ people do the same things the followers had done on Pentecost, they baptized them all with water. Thus, they were grafted into God’s family – the Church – through Jesus Christ!

### **They Praised God**

“When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life,’” (Acts 11:18). When this event first happened, it was a shock to the Jewish believers. It was a splash of cold water in the face. They were forced to recognize that God was going to save Gentiles on equal terms with them. How humbling it must have been for them!

By God’s grace alone, rather than human will, God had opened a pathway for the Gentiles to enter into right relationship with Him. I wonder, in our deep-seated prejudices, when we come face-to-face with the depths of the reality of what God has done through Christ for all people – for “those” people – how will we respond? There’s a wing of the Church in western society, in general, that’s resigned itself to just existing within its walls, reluctant to reach out into society, because they view the “other,” whatever that “other” looks like, with suspicion. They see that being around “those people,” might change “us.”

The Church should be filled to the brim with agents of change impacting people’s lives beyond the walls – for the better. And in our interactions with people who are seeking to follow Jesus Christ, we also should be changed into better image-bearers of our Divine Parent. But oftentimes, we have this fear that we’ll be changed, and so we sometimes get into a mindset that “those folks” aren’t worthy. What that really says about us is that we think that there are people, or a group of people, who are undeserving of knowing Jesus Christ and the freedom He gives even today.

### **Help Us Accept Each Other**

There’s a song in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, written in 1974, which says, “Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us; teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace. Be present, Lord, among us, and bring us to believe we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live. Teach us, O Lord, Your lessons, as in

our daily life we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith. Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some, to love them as we find them, or as they may become.”<sup>1</sup>

When we look at how those first Jewish believers reacted we see this very clearly. In that last Scripture verse we read that they praised God. When our brothers and sisters are in the process of coming to Christ, we today ought to do the same, and be catalysts and encouragers for them to continue working out their salvation through the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We’re called to love all – regardless of our prejudices. And we should also be praising God for, and with, them!

**Prayer:** Alpha and Omega, First and Last, Glory outshining all the lights of heaven: Pour out upon us Your Spirit of faithful love and abundant compassion, so that we may rejoice in the splendor of Your works while we wait in expectation for the new heaven and the new earth You promise when Christ shall come again. Amen.

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1 “Help Us Accept Each Other,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (United Methodist Publishing: Nashville, 1989) page 560.