

CHALLENGING OUR COMFORT ZONE

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Acts 10 & 11 (select verses)

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"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35) No one was more surprised than Peter when these words came out of his mouth. At the time, he was standing inside the home of Cornelius the centurion, an officer in the Roman army that occupied Judea. We are told that Cornelius was a good guy and well thought of by the Jews. He had even become a God-fearer, in other words, someone who believed in Israel's God. But as an uncircumcised Gentile who did not observe Jewish dietary laws he was still considered an outsider. Believing was not enough to make him an insider.

In fact, in those days there were some Jews who firmly believed Gentiles were hopelessly immoral and prone to idolatry. According to those Jews, there was no real hope for them. But there were other Jews who gave them the benefit of the doubt and lived with them in harmony and with respect. But the one thing they simply could not ever do was eat together, and that's because as hard as they tried, Gentiles might slip up and put some pork in the beans, or thicken a veal stew with some milk, and any slip ups like that would have been absolutely horrible for a Jew.

I wish there was some way for us to understand how important dietary law was to the people of Israel. Most of us have eaten ham and bacon all our lives, and we do not think twice about combining milk and meat, but if we were first-century Jews, the very thought might make us break out in a cold sweat. Perhaps it would be something like coming to church one morning to find potato chips and beer on the communion table instead of bread and grape juice. Such a substitution might get some people excited about church, but for most of us it would be unthinkable to do such a thing. Some might say that food is food. But Jesus told us to do it a certain way, and we have been doing it that way ever since he told us to do so. He said, "Do this in remembrance of me" with bread and wine, not chips and beer. And even though we decided its okay to use unfermented wine in the form of grape juice, we would not be who we are if we ate potato chips and drank beer on Communion Sundays.

If that does not help you understand the dietary issue, then imagine anything that, for you, is the dividing line between Christians and non-Christians – the one thing that makes us who we are, that is not negotiable, that we cannot let slide without letting slide our whole identity as people of God. And when you figure out what that is, get ready to let it go, because that is what Peter did. God gave Peter a vision that challenged everything he had ever believed about who he was and how he was supposed to live in relation to others.

This Peter, of course, is the same Simon Peter we know from the gospels. He was the first to step out on the water toward Jesus, the first to confess Jesus' true identity, the first to deny him and, after his death, the first to formally allow Gentiles into the Christian church. Here is how it happened, according to Luke in the book of Acts.

Peter was staying in Joppa, a seaport that is now a suburb of Tel Aviv. It was a largely Gentile city, and yet his preaching and teaching and performing of miracles were basically limited to the Jewish inhabitants of Joppa. Cornelius was in Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government, about 34 miles straight up the coast; it would be about 40 miles if driving by car today. Apparently God was in both places, arranging the visions that would bring them together. Cornelius' dream came first. It was about three in the afternoon when an angel came into his room, clear as day. The angel said that Cornelius

was a good man, whose alms and prayers pleased God very much. Then the angel told him to send some men to Joppa, to the house where Peter was staying.

The next day about noon, as those men were approaching the city, Peter was praying up on the roof of the house. While he was there he started feeling very hungry. He asked for something to eat, but while it was still cooking he had a vision of his own – a much stranger vision than Cornelius had the day before. Peter sees heaven open and something like a large sheet was lowered to the ground by its four corners. Peter looks inside. Now certainly it's not unusual for people to imagine their favorite foods when they are hungry, but that's far from what happens. What Peter sees are camels, badgers, buzzards, pigs and all kinds of other creatures that were on the "Do Not Eat" list in Leviticus 11. It was enough to make a good Jewish man lose his appetite. These were creatures that a good Jew dared not even touch, much less eat. The Jewish laws were strict, and Peter had faithfully kept them all his life. Those laws had helped maintain the Jewish identity throughout centuries of foreign occupation. It is probably not unlike how a sheet full of rats and lizards, snakes and bats might be extremely repulsive to most of us if we were told to eat them.

But then the voice came, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." (Acts 10:13) Peter couldn't blame the voice on someone else, because he knew the voice was God's. He just couldn't believe that God was telling him to break the sacred dietary laws that he had been taught by his parents and grandparents. Perhaps his immediate thought was that God must be joking or testing him, but God was insistent. Peter was shocked; he was appalled; he said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." (Acts 10:14) But that's not the answer God was looking for, so God then said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10:15) And to make sure that Peter didn't miss the point, God emphasized it three times before the sheet was lifted back into heaven.

So when Cornelius' men arrived shortly after that and told him they were there because of a vision, Peter put two and two together. He went back with them to Caesarea where Cornelius met him and took him into his house, a house that was full of Gentile relatives and close friends. This must have taken Peter aback. He had prepared himself to meet one Gentile, but certainly not a whole house full of them. "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile." (Acts 10:28) Can you believe that was the first thing that came out of Peter's mouth? It was not a very nice thing to say. It must have sounded like the same "putdown" they had heard so many times before from their Jewish neighbors who would not even step into their home, because they were afraid they might be contaminated just by being in the same room with them.

"BUT..." Peter said next. You know, that word can make all the difference. Sometimes I think the whole gospel swings on that word – "I was lost BUT now I'm found, was blind BUT now I see." It means things can change. It means we do not always know everything there is to know. It means God can still teach us something. It means God might just challenge us to step beyond what we are used to – to step outside our comfort zone. "BUT," Peter said, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection." (Acts 10:28-29) Peter then inquires as to why Cornelius sent for him.

Cornelius says that he and all who were gathered wanted to hear whatever God had told Peter to say. So Peter began by telling them what he had just learned for himself about God not showing partiality, and how everyone who believes in him and does what is right is acceptable to him. The sharing of that insight likely caused Gentile jaws to drop in that room; they had never heard a Jew say such a thing. What Peter

declared was something that no one on earth had authorized him to say. He didn't call a meeting for discussion or check with anyone at first church Jerusalem. He did not even back himself up by quoting scripture. Peter relied fully on the revelation God had given just him, and on his new belief that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on everyone in that room, both the Jews who were there with Peter and on the crowd of Cornelius' family and friends. Peter clearly sees that Gentiles must no longer be kept outside the circle of those chosen and blessed by God, and so he goes ahead and baptizes all those Gentiles right then and there. It was a wonderful high point in the story, and it was exactly what God wanted to happen!

Of course, when Peter got back to Jerusalem, his Jewish brothers jumped all over him. Why had he gone to that house in the first place, and what possessed him to eat unclean food? From their perspective Peter had sold out. He had crossed over the dividing line between God's people and other people.

But with gentle determination Peter explained to them the vision he had been given – a vision that included all creatures, all people, whom God alone had the right to call clean or unclean. He had not sold out - he had traded up! When Peter saw what happened at Cornelius' house he knew without a doubt that he had done the right thing. "If then God gave them the same gift of the Spirit that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ," Peter said, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17) When Peter said that, everyone got quiet. But then it hit them and they started praising God. Wow, what a revelation! God has a heart for the Gentiles. God loves people who don't look and act and believe like me.

This important and challenging story from the tenth and eleventh chapters of Acts reminds us that God doesn't necessarily consider sacred the things we consider sacred. And in order to respond to God's call today, we might have to do things differently than we did yesterday, last year, or fifty years ago. I know the thought is unsettling, but both the Bible and history show us that God's call is much more likely to be unsettling and challenging than comfortable and easy. So perhaps, God is not only challenging Peter but also you and me to let go of some "sacred" things that served us well in the past but are now preventing us from accomplishing God's mission in the world.

For I can't help but wonder how often you and I hold onto old thoughts and ideas and judgments with the outcome being that we hinder God? How often, right here in this church, do we try to say where the Spirit may or may not blow, when the only thing God has asked us to do is to try and keep up with it wherever it goes? God continues to challenge his people to step outside our comfort zone, not just because He enjoys stirring things up and making us squirm a bit – although, there is Biblical evidence that God enjoys doing just that. But the main reason God challenges us to step outside our comfort zone is so that we might bring to new people the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Great God, you who have loved us and saved us, we each seem to have our own reasons, our own excuses for not heeding your call to take the saving message of the gospel to others. Challenge our convictions and the attitudes that prevent us from fulfilling your call to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Amen.