



# “Us And Them And The Kingdom Of God”

a sermon by

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Our text comes from the book of Acts 10:27-11:4. It is a more lengthy passage, but well worth the context. Luke inaugurates the Gentile mission by introducing us to the apostle Paul through the account of his conversion, but then shifts gears immediately to look again at Peter, who would actually be the first to witness God's plan for the Gentiles in action.

We should preface this text by saying that Peter had just received a vision from God whereby a huge sheet filled with animals descended from the sky, and a voice commanded him to kill and eat. Peter protested saying that he had never touched or eaten of anything that was unclean, so would never do such a thing, when God tells him not to call anything impure that God has made clean, meaning that in this new order there was neither clean nor unclean - quite a shift from the Jewish laws. Simultaneous to Peter's vision, Cornelius, an Italian noncommissioned officer who led about 600 men, and a righteous man himself, had a vision that he was to seek out Peter and bring him to his house, gathering his friends and family to hear him. Peter is brought to Cornelius, and here we begin our text.

Talking with him [Cornelius], Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them, "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius answered, "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Then Peter began to speak, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached - how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen - by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So 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.” Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened.”

I find this line so classic - “The apostles and brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God. So 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.” And to think - this conversation isn’t even taking place in a middle school cafeteria. But that might be where it started - long before they met Jesus, long before their bar mitzvahs even, Peter and the other circumcised Jews had been taught about clean and unclean. Taught at the feet of the laws of Leviticus and from the lips of their parents and grandparents - what was in and what was out. What you could eat; what you couldn’t. What was kosher. Who you could spend time with, and who you were to avoid like the plague lest your very association with them provoke God’s offence and your probation in the covenant community. And then you would have to get righteous again, which is no small task.

The lesson was clear. The lines drawn quite distinctly so you might understand the shock of the apostles as good Jews for Jesus – “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them?” And so too might we see that Peter’s conversion - and it was a conversion - was no small matter when he discerned the truth that God’s spirit had leveled the playing field when it came to salvation and righteousness. Much as it is so often today, it was the case then that to be secure with who was ‘in’ it was crucial to identify who was surely ‘out,’ and so it is little wonder that Peter’s conversion to the truth that there is neither clean nor unclean didn’t come in a blinding flash like Paul’s encounter, but rather worked its way slowly into his mind and heart as it had a lifetime of conditioning to overcome. Until one day he was able to proclaim for himself and others, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean ... 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 ... can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

It came as a surprise to him - which is a little funny seeing as God’s promise to extend the covenant beyond the Jews dated back to Abraham - I’d say he was having a “Peter moment” - except that all were caught off guard that there was no longer ‘us’ or ‘them’ - but that there is only ‘we’ in the kingdom of God.

The routines of their religion had helped them forget that part. And suddenly the scope of grace moves beyond the comfortable realm of the upper room and out into the world where it cannot be cornered by professions of faith or appropriate demonstrations of religiosity, defined by color or creed, or birthright, or education, or bonus structures, or contribution to the workforce, or zip code, or knowledge of the old hymns and traditions of the church but is on the loose - the reckless Spirit of God bent on making us all shift a little uncomfortably in our seats.

Suddenly, for Peter and the apostles, living for Christ in the world got a little more complex. When the rubber hit the road and the theological bones of this Gentile mission started getting some flesh on them it got a little more complex for all of us. There is no clean or unclean. No us and them, but only Christ and his love. As one author puts it, “This is the moment when

new religions or sects are born - when what has hitherto been taken for granted as a fundamental and defining principle is called into question - and the question is heard as the voice of God.”

The apostles heard that grace had been poured out on a man and his household, that their friend had been a part of a radical new thing - had experienced first-hand the way God would transform the world one Gentile and Jew alike at a time, and the first thing that came out of their mouths was- “You ate with who? You met him where he lived - are you crazy?” It seems like such a familiar response, doesn't it? Perhaps more than we'd care to admit. And yet that is exactly what God did - met us where we lived. In sin. In death. Moved in next door and set up shop and befriended us despite what the neighbors would think and revolutionized the world by seeing through all the ways we define ourselves and each other and try and build ourselves up, by revealing that we are all actually broken down by the same desperation and are desperate for the love of Jesus whether we know it or not.

That is what Peter realized. It is what Paul would make his life's mission. And this conversion of Peter's would suggest that is what we, too, are called to do. To take a good hard look within ourselves - as individuals - as a church- to see what ideas about 'us' and 'them' and the kingdom of God have been ingrained upon us since childhood - and hold them to the light of Christ's love.

Over the course of the past eight chapters, Luke depicts the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch, of a vehement persecutor of Christians, and now of those in Roman law, indeed, even those within the ranks of our faith who are converted to a deeper understanding of what Christianity is all about. But these stories are not ends in and of themselves, no conversion experience of seeing things more clearly ever is. Rather, they are beginnings - beginnings that testify to the work of God constantly in action, calling us to seek out the barriers that divide us from ourselves, each other, and from God, identifying them not for their own sake, but for the sake of rising above them that we might fully participate in the continuing power of God to create the Christian community ex nihilo, fresh in each generation by the power of the Spirit. The stories are meant to encourage us that the church, even in its most trying times, may take heart, knowing that all is not left up to us nor is the community of faith our sole creation.

Within my own tradition, “Protestant Reformers were so convinced that sin is so deep-rooted in human thinking and willing, that the gospel is so demanding and different, that only a lifetime of conversion can change us into the new creations God has in mind for us ... presumably, we can never become too old, too adept at living the Christian life to be exempt from the need for more conversion, additional turning. The Christian life is akin to the way in which Luke organizes the life of (the apostles) - a series of journeys, pilgrimages, excursions out into some unexplored territory where all that is known is the faithfulness of God.”

Peter's conversion to the fact that there is nothing clean nor unclean, but God has called all good, that there is no 'us and them' is only one example. But within our own lives, within our workplaces and families, within the church even, I would wager we could all find countless others if we only muster the courage to look. It is scary and gritty to be sure, it promises to make familiar that sensation of shifting uncomfortably in our seats, but it is good and right. It is what God challenges his disciples in Acts, challenges his disciples today to do.

That's why Presbyterians call the church Reformed and always Reforming. Always being challenged, always pushing our way out of our comfort zones and upper rooms and into the world, always being made new according to the Word of God living, speaking, moving and converting us today. Author Joseph Barndt uses a stronger word for it, 'rebellion.' As he writes that what we need is, "theologically-necessitated rebellion against all that imprisons us and keeps us from acting as responsible children of God. We must rebel against our fear, rebel against our neurotic needs to oppress ... We must rebel against all that holds us powerless to act in love and justice for our fellowman ..."

A call to rebellion may sound a bit frightening, but it is precisely what the gospel of Jesus Christ has always been. And our teacher and example in the art of rebelling is none other than our Lord himself. His life and ministry, his teaching and his command direct us to defy (all that seeks) to take away our freedom and render us powerless to love effectively and justly." Christ frees us from the categories, from the labels, be they Republican or Democrat, rich, poor, black or white or countless others. Frees us from the assumptions that are placed upon us or that we place upon others and tells us that it is better to face openly what divides us than to divide, that it takes wisdom to enter into the deeply-held convictions of others, and that we are incomplete without one another as only together do we even begin to reflect the fullness of the kingdom of God, which is far bigger than Peter or Cornelius or the apostles or any of us would ever have imagined. Thank God for that. Amen.