

Sermon: Acts 10:1-48

The Conversion of Peter

- One of the most important things that's ever happened to me was getting invited to lunch. I was a sophomore in high school. Fifteen. A cornet player in the marching band. A Boy Scout. A nerd on track to be a super nerd. My best friend was a year behind me, so still at the junior high. At San Angelo Central High School in West Texas there were 2000 kids. And when the lunch bell rang, they were unleashed from the parking lots all over the city, which was just a bit bigger than Missoula. Lunch was an hour and eight minutes. A joy for those with a pack of friends and a driver's license. A long time for a kid who couldn't drive yet. I'd get something at the snack bar, hang out by the band hall, do some biology homework. Wait for fourth period.

But one day some guys invited me to go off campus for lunch. When the bell rang, they squeezed me into a red Jeep Cherokee. And the adventures began. Mexican food. Banter about music. Cruising around town with the windows down--telling stories, comparing lives. Getting into a little trouble. They thought I was funny, which was a big shocker. I felt like I belonged.

That first day was an invite to lunch. But what I got out of it was friends who allowed me to be myself. People who knew me for who I was and stuck with me. I would come to connect their inclusion with something I was hearing the pastor talk about at church. With my beans and cheese and flower tortillas, I got a taste of unconditional love. All because a bunch of high school guys invited me to jump in a Jeep. Something compelled them to step across the social norms of pecking order and awkwardness and everything that makes you West Texas tough – all the rules that can separate high school guys. They surprised me with an inclusion I just couldn't have expected.

Are you the kind of person who risks making invitations like that?

-Today we continue our sermon series 'Acts of the Spirit: The Church Becoming Like Jesus.' We'll hear a pivotal story from the 10th chapter of Acts where the Spirit redefines for good who gets invited to be part of God's people.

It's about Simon Peter, whom you know as Jesus' passionate and impulsive disciple. And it's about a man named Cornelius, a Centurion of the Roman army, a God-fearing Gentile. But principally it's about God. It's about what God is doing in Christ, not only to include persons like Cornelius, but to convert the imagination of persons like Peter by matching up a Jew and a Gentile to jump in the same Jeep for lunch.

-[Read Acts 10.1-48. Use story from Spill the Beans Worship Ideas, 4.19.15]

OK. So Cornelius is a military officer of the occupying oppressor Roman force, but he is God-fearing, which means that he has been attracted to belief in the God of Israel and to the spirituality of the Jewish people – prayer, generosity.

As a Gentile, Cornelius is marked by neither circumcision nor the strict observance of Jewish law (Torah). But in order to become a follower of the Jewish Messiah, Cornelius would have been expected to convert to

the practices of Judaism. Including circumcision. Including cutting off your non-Jewish family, excluding non-Jews from the table. This is not a casual request to ask of someone.

So there were deep-seated divisions between Gentiles and Jews. But an angel asks Cornelius to send for Peter.

Meanwhile Peter is having a prayer/vision/dream at lunchtime. What are some things you would consider revolting to eat? [cat? brains? eyeballs?]

Leviticus 11 contains the distinctions between clean animals the people of Israel could eat and unclean animals they could not. Kosher laws. Among four-footed animals, for example, Jews could not eat the camel, the rock badger, the hare, or the pig. Among reptiles: the great lizard, the gecko, the land crocodile, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. And among the birds: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, the buzzard, ...every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk... 'These you shall regard as detestable. They shall not be eaten; they are an abomination.'

Jews like Peter could not eat unclean foods. So even associating with Gentiles like Corenelius who ate those foods would make them unclean. That wall of separation between Gentiles and Jews is revealed in what Peter will say to Cornelius in Cesarea. 'As you are well aware, it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.'

Why?

NT Wright: The Jewish people were called to be separate, to be holy, to stand apart from the rest of humanity so that through them God's light might shine.

But of course, what might at first be faithful separation gets easily twisted into pride in how right or pure you are, and pride in how right or pure you are then gets twisted into prejudice (the tendency to pre-judge a person, to make up our minds before we consider complexity). The Bible tells us the story of how we religious people love too-much the superiority of being gatekeepers for God.

C.S. Lewis as a child said: 'Daddy, I have a prejudice against the French.' His father asked 'Why?' And, precociously, he answered: 'If I knew that, it wouldn't be a prejudice.'

Prejudices were thick between Jews and Gentiles.

Non-Jews were considered detestable as pigs. To share table fellowship with them would be like rolling in the mud of immorality. And because Jews and Gentiles didn't associate they most often had cruel and suspicious things to say about the other.

Revulsion is cultivated isn't it? Someone was sharing the other night at Session how their parents hated the idea of Kennedy becoming President because he was a dangerous Catholic! Do you recall the ways you were schooled to revile some other group as a kid?

We might ask how we're forming our children to beware some other group now. I can imagine the damage even our red/blue shorthand is having.

Do you remember the soreq, the dividing wall in the Temple courts that kept Gentiles away from the altar and the Holy of Holies. Do you remember the signs warning death to any Gentile found inside that wall? Call it a cultural artifact that taught the children just who to detest.

-So. Do you see what the Spirit of God is orchestrating in this passage? Do you see what this vision of revolting-animals-now-called-clean suggests to Peter just as the men from Cornelius come?

-Sidebar: Are people supposed to follow Leviticus 11 or Acts 10?

NT Wright: Scripture is 'clear that the Mosaic law [Leviticus 11, was] God's word to Israel and should be treated as such. But Paul and others are equally clear that, in light of Jesus Christ, it was to be seen as God's word for a particular period and for a particular purpose.' Imagine, Wright says, a mother seeing her child about to cross a busy street. 'Stop. Stand still!' she shouts urgently. But the next moment, when the flow of traffic has stopped, she might call out, 'OK, You can cross!' This mother is offering two different commands, but they're not contradictory. They have the same larger purpose of safe crossing. They are just for different times.

So now God is intervening in the life of his people with a new command. 'Do not call anything impure that God calls clean. If God says it's okay, it's okay.'

When Peter gets to Cesaria, he has a new realization. God is breaking down the dividing walls. His vision (of unclean animals declared clean) isn't about food it's about people! The gospel invitation is to both Jews and Gentiles. That is, to both Jews and non-Jews. And who are Jews and non-Jews? ALL.

God is sending Peter to have the deepest kind of spiritual fellowship with Gentiles, the kind demonstrated by eating at the same table. By getting over his cultivated disgust. His realization: 'I now get it - that God has no favorites.'

-Do you see how the Spirit of Christ calls us would-be apprentices of Christ not only to profess Jesus, but to conversion? Of perspective? Of eyes? Of heart?

-Let's go back to high school. Such a shaping time. When I was in high school, the most important movie I saw was not Top Gun (which, I have to admit, played a big part in sending me into my misadventure in the military). No. The more influential movie was Breakfast Club. You may have missed it. It was an '80s moment. And you might have come from another decade.

But the premise of Breakfast Club was that five kids get stuck in a high school library for Saturday detention. Five kids from entirely different social strata and cliques. A nerd. An athlete. A princess (think homecoming queen). A seemingly hardened rebel. And a basket case (another level of misfit, who it turns out didn't even have to come to detention but just needed a place to go for the day). So...Breakfast Club. What we get a window on is a day of poorly supervised kids getting the chance to finally confront the complexity of their lives beyond their labels, beyond the barriers to their being in any way connected. They get to know one another at the level of their longing to be known, loved, and set free from the social rules that wall them in.

I watched that movie with my friends. I watched it at youth group. I dragged my parents into watching it (turns out there was a lot more cussing than I had remembered). I've since showed it to my own kids (and...it turns out there is a lot more cussing than I remembered).

But I love it. I love its honesty and raw need and hope for what could be in a world beyond the walls we build. I love how it pointed me toward the kingdom. Toward a world according to God bursting into the status quo. Toward who I wanted to be and how I myself might cram some misfit kids like all of you into a red Jeep.

-The story of Peter and Cornelius is about the surprising, boundary-breaking welcome of God for those who were once considered outsiders to the life of faith in Christ.

But it's also about how the Spirit of God continues to startle and convert us persons of faith along the course of our journeys.

Think what prejudices and core convictions Peter had to overcome to go to Cornelius in Caesaria! If you ask a fish how the water is, it might just say: What water? Our prejudices are like that. Like the water we swim in but don't see. What prejudices? we ask. But Peter had them. And he had justification for them just like we do. Athletes don't hang out with band nerds. And WASPS don't hang out with Irish Catholics. And whites don't hang out with Blacks. And Christians don't hang out with Muslims. And conservatives don't hang out with liberals. And citizens don't hang out with persons who are undocumented. And straight people don't hang out with persons who are queer. And soldiers don't hang out with protesters. And Presbyterians don't hang out with evangelicals. And the wealthy don't hang out with the poor. And dogs don't hang out with cats.

What prejudices might the Lord be requiring you and me to overcome? What walls might the Lord be requiring you and me to break down so that (in Nadia Bolz Weber's phrasing) 'the world according to God might burst in'? //

-Eugene Peterson has said that the 'complete Christian needs two conversions' and that 'Peter is a model of them both.'

- On the Road to Caesaria Philippi, Jesus got hold of Peter to love and rescue him – leads to a relationship and life of discipleship
- In Caesaria Maritima, in house of Cornelius, Roman soldier, Christ helps Peter recognize that this invitation to him is meant to be an invitation through him to persons of all nations.
- This is one of the key tasks of Christian growth: to make this transition from what is effectively private spirituality for me to what is public spirituality for all. From someone whose needs are satisfied in Christ to someone who shares Christ with those previously thought to be unclean.

-In this season of Lent, we try to get honest with ourselves about our sin. Which requires a second conversion. Which requires us to look up from our private spirituality to become part of God's breaking down the walls. To expand our vision for whom Christ longs to draw into communion, to welcome to his table, to invite into the fellowship of believers.

Now I get that the last three sermons have all been about this. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Ananias and Saul/Paul. Now Peter and Cornelius. All about Christ breaking down the barriers of separation and transforming the whole worldview of folks who already thought they were Christian. Christ rescuing people who already thought they had been rescued. Christ overturning the way-things-are for folks who were sure they had already been flipped upside down. In the Bible, there is no punctuation. So when things happen over and over and over, that is a biblical exclamation point! The invitation of Christ goes farther than we who guard the boundaries of acceptability are comfortable with, far enough to be threatening.

Do you know what happens when Peter goes back home to Jerusalem to report to the Jewish believers there how Cornelius's family welcomes the gospel and prays in tongues? And let's recall this is Simon Peter. He goes back to Jerusalem, and how do they react? They get angry fearful and critical! How can Peter have taken my private religion to those dirty Gentiles? How can he have entered their house and eaten with them?

This faith we share is a dangerous thing. This Jesus. But don't you love the dangerous freedom of God's Spirit? Of the gospel's expansiveness? It feels like the threatening disruption of Breakfast Club. 'Dogs and cats, living together.'

- Did you note the spiritual hunger of Cornelius. It's like the Bible is jumping up and down to insist that these persons we wall off from ourselves are longing to know the truth and beauty and goodness of God in Christ, too, even if they can't fully articulate it, even if our prejudices can't fully fathom it.

So, Friends, I ask: Have you seen the sheet full of revolting animals today?

Who are the people for whom you've possessed little expectation that they might be drawn to prayer, that they might be inclined toward Christ-centered relationships, that they might take part in the mission of communicating God's grace to others?

How might you pray for someone else that they might come to share in the life of Christ's shocking welcome?

How might you open your heart to the humbling Spirit for a more expansive vision of relationship with those you have considered outsiders?

To whom is the Lord sending you with an invitation to lunch?

Amen.