

Sermon Notes May 15, 2022

Focus: Acts 11 - Peter, Simon, and Cornelius

Lectionary Readings

Peter has a vision of unclean animals that he is supposed to eat. This occurs on the roof of Simon the Tanner's house in Acts 10 and is retold in Acts 11. As a result of the vision, the voice of God compels Peter to leave the tanner's home and visit the home of 'unclean' Cornelius. I could just say, "God loves everybody from every walk of life." True... but I hope we can find more insight by looking at Peter and Cornelius in the context of Jewish and non-Jewish relations in of the day.

Acts 2

The chapter highlights the huge multicultural party at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is for Jew and non-Jew equally.

Acts 9

This chapter is a story of a bicultural figure's death (Dorcas). This death leaves a hole in the community, but she is raised from the dead which blesses all of Joppa (her hometown). The dividing wall continues to crumble as the Spirit moves through the story of Acts.

Acts 10 and 11

Through both chapters, Peter is struggling with how to deal with non-Jewish people as spiritual beings. He is a Jewish person who is very sensitive to criticism, especially when people question his own authentic Jewishness. In that struggle, God gives Peter a vision and a spoken word that drives him to visit the non-Jewish home of Cornelius. This encounter blows the doors off Peter's Jew/Gentile reluctance. *To be clear on the cost for Peter:* there were strong cultural prohibitions actively dividing Jew and non-Jew in Peter's day.

Stinky-Jewish Tanner and Squeaky-Clean Gentile Military Person

Peter reluctantly responds to God's call to visit a non-Jew, Cornelius. This man's righteousness and faith will completely change Peter. Peter had gotten so caught up in the culture wars of his day that he would rather stay in a Jewish house of very low status Jew, than face the consequences of intimately associating with any gentile. Food, then and now, is a big deal. Whom you ate with had consequences. Lots of Jewish Christ-followers were grumbly about Jews eating with "those" people.

Stinky Simon Simon the Tanner (a Jew) was a pitiable figure. He was probably financially secure but was beneath polite society. For most of human history, tanners were on the margin of any acceptable society. Leather was extremely important for war and worship, but the people who made it were considered dirty

because they literally walked in poo. Excrement is essential for turning animal hide into usable leather. Peter had less of a problem staying in the “poo-house”, than hanging with any Gentile.

The Mishnah on Tanners The Mishnah is a compilation and interpretation of Jewish oral law. It states that a tannery should be on the east side of town no more than 50 cubits from the town outskirts (I can't tell you exactly how far that is). A synagogue could never be repurposed for a tannery. In religious life, the tanners themselves could not even be part of Temple festivals.

You can kick tanners to the curb Rabbi Meir believed even if a woman married a tanner, she could later change her mind and summarily divorce him. Also, she did not have to marry his brother if her husband died. This “brother marriage” was part of Jewish custom. He was that bad.

Squeaky Clean Cornelius Peter hesitates to go to Cornelius because Jews and Gentiles were in two different worlds. Peter could stay in the home of the stinky Jewish tanner, but felt it was more improper to enter the home of a holy Gentile. Cornelius was clearly “cleaner” with respect to the Law than the tanner except for his ethnic and religious affiliation.

The baptisms that happened after Peter was overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit in Cornelius' house were less about cleaning off stinking sinners and more about creating a community of believers not bound by ethnicity or class. Acts 11 (today) is a retelling of the story to help the critics of Peter and other loopy Jewish Christians understand the logic of this emerging, less ethnically bound community.

You get hints of how afraid Peter had been before Cornelius. In Galatians 2, Paul brags about humiliating Peter for not being enlightened enough to treat Gentile and Jew the same at the dinner table.

The water of baptism, especially in Cornelius' home, is a sign of the marriage between Gentile and Jewish spirituality. The Holy Spirit threw a big multicultural party at Pentecost, threw a resurrection party with Dorcas, and threw a baptism party with Cornelius' family.

Say ‘yes’ to God and follow where God leads You are never too stinky, old, or tired to start over again. I hope you are not too holy, too accomplished, too content to be impervious to changing your mind. God is always in the business of resetting our tightly framed sense of who is good and who is bad -- who is a Gentile who is a Jew.

Reset moments are a specialty of the Holy Spirit, and reset moments always widen the circle of God's mercy and grace.

Todd