

The Church in Action sermon series
From “Them” to “Us” – Acts 10:34-48
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There have only been a few watershed moments in the history of civilization, moments that change the whole trajectory of human existence. The discovery of fire. The invention of the wheel. The first time someone looked at a cow’s udder and said, “I’m gonna drink whatever comes out of that.” More recent examples are things like the invention of the printing press, the creation of the internet, and the time that one guy’s chocolate fell into that other guy’s jar of peanut butter and the Reese’s Cup was created. Truly divine inspiration!

Another of these moments happens in today’s story. It’s a long one, so I’m going to tell you the story then read the pivotal part near the end. As we continue our summer sermon series on the book of Acts, we’re tracing the journey of the early church as they lived out Jesus’s commission to take the gospel to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. But for that to happen, some really important people are going to have to change their minds. Or, more accurately, to have their minds changed by God.

Oh, but that’s not easy, is it? There are some things we just know and nothing is going to make us think differently. It’s how we make sense of the world. We sort people, ideas, and experiences into neat little boxes. People who vote this way or that way. People who live in this part of town or that part of town. People who are gluten-free and people who have joy in their lives. As a gluten-free person, I can say that. There are some things we just know.

In our story, Peter was the same way. In his world there were clean people and unclean people. Jews and Gentiles. People you ate with, and people you absolutely did not eat with. You didn’t just disagree with Gentiles—you avoided them. That wasn’t his personal preference, mind you; that’s what the Bible told him to do. His distaste for Gentiles was ordained by God, and you don’t argue with God.

Our story doesn’t start with Peter, but with Cornelius, one of those Gentiles. He’s a Roman centurion, which means he’s a commanding officer of 100 soldiers in the army that is subjugating the Jews. But the story also tells us that Cornelius feared God, which meant he was curious about the Jewish faith, and that he was devout and generous. Already in this story, God is smashing the stereotypes the listeners would have had about Roman centurions.

One day, while Peter is on his rooftop praying, he gets hungry. That’s a warning right there. When we’re hungry, we’re not always in our right mind. I’ve made the mistake of going to the grocery store while I was hungry and came home with half the ice cream section. It might have been Peter’s hunger that contributed to his strange vision. He sees a sheet descend from heaven filled with all kinds of critters and birds and reptiles, and he hears God’s voice say, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” And Peter says, “No, Lord.”

Now, let me just note that saying, “No, Lord” might be a good clue that you’ve got your priorities a little screwy. But Peter has really good cause for his divine denial. As a devout Jew, his whole life has been spent fastidiously following God’s law, doing everything he was supposed to do and avoiding everything he was supposed to avoid. This would have included watching his diet so that he didn’t eat anything that wasn’t on God’s approved list. His whole life, Peter has acted this way, being obedient and faithful, and now God was telling him to fry up some bacon and sauté some shrimp. Peter’s thinking is, “I can’t do this now because I’ve never

done it before.” What do you do when something happens that makes you question a long-standing belief?

God tells Peter, “What I have made clean, don’t call unclean.” Of course, that’s not about the food. It’s about people. And Peter has to just sit with this, just like we do. I don’t know about you, but I like to think I’m a really good Christian...to a point. We pray to God, asking God to make us better people, more loving, more gracious, more forgiving...to a point. Because that righteous indignation at “those people” can feel really nice in our hands. I’ve found that believers who think themselves among God’s inner circle are often inclined on this theological basis to think that God has not chosen anyone else who disagrees with them. Then we hear a sermon that we think is for that one person on social media, until we realize God is speaking to us and those boxes we have may no longer be applicable.

After this vision, there’s a knock at Peter’s door. It is men sent by Cornelius. The Spirit tells Peter, “Go with them.” God doesn’t hand Peter a complete script or a five-year strategic plan. God simply tells him the next faithful step he’s supposed to take. Sometimes, I wish God could show me the whole picture, but most often God only shows me where the next puzzle piece goes. God is frustrating like that, forcing me to be faithful rather than know everything.

So, Peter goes with the men and arrives at Cornelius’s house. Cornelius falls down to worship Peter, but Peter tells him, “Stand up, I am only a mortal.” Then Peter states this fact: “You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider.” That could be the end of the sentence right there. “Sorry, guys, but you know I’m not supposed to be here. This goes against everything I’ve believed my whole life. Like chocolate and peanut butter, Jews and Gentiles aren’t supposed to mix together.” But Peter doesn’t end the sentence there. He says, “But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

“But.” Barbara Brown Taylor says that sometimes the whole gospel swings on that word. “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” She says, “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.” If we are open to learning it.

While standing in the house of Gentile – which was forbidden by Jewish law – Peter begins to share the good news, which I’ll now read from Acts 10, starting with verse 34:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” You know what that implies? It implies that Peter didn’t understand that before. It’s Peter’s way of saying, “I was wrong.” I wonder how many marriages could be saved with those words? How many friendships? How many churches? “I used to think this, but I was wrong.” It’s those words that can turn enemies into allies, that can turn faceless groups into real human beings, that can turn “them” into “us.” If we have the courage to say them.

We’re told while Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles, and the Jews present there are astounded that the gift had been poured out “even on the Gentiles.” This story is often called the “Gentile Pentecost.” This is the day the Holy Spirit descends on the Gentiles in Cornelius’s house and they all begin to speak in tongues, just like the Jews on the original day of Pentecost. You may remember that Peter was at that Pentecost, too, and preached a powerful sermon that converted thousands of people. So, now he says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Not after they become Jewish. Not after they prove themselves. Not after they turn in a pledge card. But right where they are. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing this people?”

That's the question, right? If God says it's clean, who are we to say it's unclean? This isn't about food. It's about people. It's about turning fences into bridges. If God welcomes these people, will we? It's about acknowledging the invisible lines we draw – political, economic, racial, denominational, personal – and realizing that God gives us a giant eraser called “grace.” I know a lot of people who act more like Christians than a lot of Christians I know. Should I consider them a “them” because they don't look like me or love who I love or believe in the same God I believe in? Just as we are invited to the table even though we don't deserve it, we're called to do the same for others, to take them out of the boxes we constructed for them, to see them through new, gospel-infused eyes.

Maybe that means coffee with someone different than us. Or choosing to listen more than we speak. Or educating ourselves before responding to a post on social media. Or just not responding at all. Or trading assumptions for curiosity. A few years ago, I told a church member I was moving to the north side of Lexington, just off Loudon Avenue, and with a very concerned looked, they said, “Are you sure that's safe?” It was. But that question made me examine the places in my life where my assumptions may not align with reality. Where are the places I think are not safe? Who are the people that I think are not worthy of God's love? Where are our assumptions keeping us from experiencing the fullness of the diversity of life God has for us?

Peter had lived his whole life assuming he knew who was in and out, who was “us” and “them.” And then he realized God's table was so much bigger than he imagined. Who are the people we've quietly decided are too different, too difficult, too political, too broken, too wealthy, too poor, too young, too old, too far gone? We may never say those things out loud, but our assumptions shape our actions, influence how we see and treat others. Is our table too small for what God is doing in our world today?

Peter's willingness to follow God's leading and change his mind opens up the doors for the gospel to go to the Gentiles, and it fundamentally alters the rest of history. That's powerful. I've learned that faith isn't pretending we have all the right answers but about allowing God to lead us. Or, as one writer said, “Faith is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing now?’” And that often means we have to draw bigger circles. Let me warn you, being willing to be led by God may not change the rest of history. But it might change you. And, somehow, that feels like exactly what God wants for us.