

“*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner!*”

Our first reading this morning are the final five verses of a story that takes up the entire 10th chapter of the book of Acts. And it’s a really important story because it tells us about a major turning point in the mission and ministry of the followers of Jesus. It’s a story that tells us about why those followers of Jesus suddenly, and without any forewarning, began to look at the people around them with new eyes. And so, I want to recap that story for you very briefly.

The story opens with us being introduced to a man named Cornelius, who lived in the city of Caesarea. Cornelius is a Gentile; and that word simply tells us that he’s not a Jew. But maybe even more important is the fact that Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army. And so, as far as any Jew was concerned, Cornelius was not only an outsider, he was also an *enemy*. However, outward appearances are often deceiving, because we are also told that Cornelius was “a devout man who feared God with all his household; [that] he gave alms generously to [those in need] and [that he] prayed constantly to God” (vs 2).

Well, one day while he was praying, Cornelius has a vision in which an angel from heaven tells him to send some men to the city of Joppa – which was 35 miles away – where they are to find a man named Simon Peter, and bring him back to Cornelius’ house.

A few days later, and over in Joppa, Simon Peter is also deep in prayer when *he* has a vision. And in his vision he sees a sheet being lowered from heaven, and it’s filled with all sorts of animals, and reptiles, and birds which, by the Jewish dietary laws, were forbidden for consumption. But then a voice from heaven says to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat” (vs. 13). But Peter refuses, saying “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (vs. 14). But then, that same voice says to Peter: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (vs. 15). And this vision is repeated two more times, almost as if to suggest that Peter was having a hard time getting the point of that vision’s message for him.

Afterwards, and while Peter is puzzling over the visions, “the Spirit says to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them’” (vv. 19-20). So, Peter goes with them.

Now, when Peter finally arrives at the house of Cornelius, he says something that alerts us to the fact that he *actually got the point* of those really weird visions. And what he says to Cornelius is this:

“You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but

(now, pay attention to what he says next, because I think that this is the *key point* this story is making)

“but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (vv. 27-28).

And then Peter begins to share with them the Good News of the Gospel, and it's at this point that our reading from Acts 10 picks up the story, and we hear how Cornelius and his entire household immediately receive the Holy Spirit, and are baptized in the name of Jesus.

End of story. But not end of sermon, because I want to explore that statement that Peter said to Cornelius, that “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (v. 28), because what does that really mean?

First, we need to look at those two words, “profane” and “unclean,” because it has some definite implications for how we are to function as the people of God in the world today.

So, the first word was “profane.” Something that is “profane” is the opposite of something that is “sacred.” Now, God is the most sacred thing there is. Am I right? Well, guess what. We humans are made in the image and likeness of God! And means that we are sacred beings as well!

And in fact, there is nothing else in all creation that scripture describes as being made in the image and likeness of God. That means that we are unique; and that we are *not* profane. No one is. We are sacred – because God is sacred, and we’re made in God’s image. And here’s the thing: We need to be treating each other, and everyone we encounter in the world around us, accordingly.

And then there’s that word “unclean.” Naturally, something that is “unclean” is the opposite of something that is “clean.” But we’re *not* really talking about hygiene. You see, in this story, “clean” and “unclean” are religious technical terms that talk about whether or not a person is in a fit state to approach God for worship or prayer.

Now, in the beginning, all things were “clean,” because all things came from God. But there were things that could happen to someone that could make them “unclean” – like inadvertently eating something that is forbidden; or contracting certain illnesses; or coming into contact with something or someone that they shouldn’t. But in the laws that God gave to those ancient Jewish people, there were certain procedures that an “unclean” person could follow that would restore their “clean-ness,” and enable them to approach God once more.

This notion of “clean” versus “unclean” was *very* important for those ancient Jewish people, and it was deeply entrenched in their culture. And it shaped the way they interacted with the people around them who were not Jewish. And their attitude was sort of like: Well, when we become “unclean” God gave *us* things to do that can restore our “clean-ness”; but God didn’t give them to you. And so, when you become “unclean,” you have no way to become “clean” again. In other words, you’re excluded from God. And that’s why we don’t want to hang around with you, or even be in the same room with you.

And that reminded me of something.

In the summer of 1988, I joined a group of my seminary classmates on a tour of the Holy Land. It was fabulous! But on one Friday afternoon, we were touring a portion of the old city of Jerusalem, when our guide pointed out a young Jewish man who was walking past us. He had his prayer shawl up over his head (like a big hoodie) so that he couldn't see the faces of the people around him. And our guide explained that he was a member of an *very conservative* Jewish group that believed that *even just looking* at someone who was “unclean” would caused *them* to become “unclean” as well.

In other words, the Old Testament laws that described what things were “clean” and “unclean,” but which also provided ways for an “unclean” person to become “clean” again, were intended by God to help keep his people healthy and safe. But over time, the purpose of those laws became distorted, and people began to use those laws that *were intended for good*, to encourage and facilitate discrimination and bigotry. And that's why this story in Acts 10 is *so* important, because it's a story about how God tried to undo the harm that the misuse of his laws had created.

We Americans are a highly fractured society. And almost anything you can think of can be, and probably has been, used to create an artificial divide between “us” and “them.” And this story

from Acts 10 is a strong reminder that this *is not the will of God for his people*. And this story challenges us to be about the task of building bridges and not walls. And through this story God is begging us to begin seeing people who might seem different from us, to see them through *his eyes*: to see those other people for who they are: that they are also God's beloved children, for whom Christ also died.

And so, this story in Acts 10 may not be anyone's favorite story from the Bible, but it may well be the most important story for everyone.

Let us pray: Grant, O Lord God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart – and especially the hearts of the people of this land – that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.