

Pastor Chris Matthis  
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Easter 6, Series B  
Saturday, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (Mother's Day)

Sermon: Peter's Dream (Clean and Unclean)

Texts: Acts 10

Focus: God doesn't play favorites.

Function: That they would not reject people God loves and for whom Christ died.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth..." (SC, 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord

Jesus Christ! Amen. Alleluia! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*

*Alleluia!* In the first century A.D., most Jewish men would rise in the morning and speak this prayer: "Blessed are you, O Lord my God, who has not made me to be born as a woman, a slave, or a Gentile dog."<sup>1</sup>

There you have it! A single prayer encapsulates all the elements of first century Judaism's misogyny, classism, and racism. The best thing in the world was to be born as a Jewish freeman. The worst thing in the world? To be anyone else.

The apostle Peter would have been familiar with this prayer. He would have learned it as a child. He likely prayed it for much of his

---

<sup>1</sup> Many still do today: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/three-blessings/>

adult life—perhaps even *after* he became a disciple of Jesus (although I cannot imagine that our Lord would have ignored such a nasty morning liturgy). Yet even if Peter had stopped praying this prayer by the time of the early Church, he still retained lingering misgivings about non-Jews. In a recent sermon, I warned against the sin of “othering,” by which we automatically assume the worst about people who are different than us. Peter was very good at othering until the events of our reading today in Acts 10.

Jewish life under the Law of Moses was all about distinctions: the separation of clean and unclean, holy and common, common and profane. For example, there were rules against using two types of fabric in the same article of clothing (Deut. 22:11). I guess that our cotton-polyester blends would not be part of their wardrobes. It was unlawful to plow with a donkey and an ox together (Deut. 22:10). Either you plowed with two donkeys or two oxen, but never both together. God gave the Israelites laws against intermarrying with the pagan peoples around them (Deut. 7:3). Nor were the Jews supposed to share meals with uncircumcised Gentiles (Ex. 12:48). Such were the holiness codes

of ancient Israel, and they were only made stricter in the years leading up to the time of Christ.

Now, because the first Christians were also Jews, they continued to observe the holiness codes, especially in regard to clean and unclean foods. The Levitical laws about food made very clear distinctions between what foods were regarded as clean or unclean. For example, all fruits, vegetables, and grains were allowable for consumption. But meats became a rather complicated affair. Generally, birds were okay as long as they did not eat carrion. But among other land animals and beasts of the field, God only permitted the Israelites to eat animals with a split hoof that also chewed the cud (i.e., ate plants). Thus sheep, goats, and cattle were on the menu because they have a split hoof and graze. But pork was unclean (forbidden) because, while pigs have a split hoof, they do not chew the cud since they are omnivores like us (they eat plants *and* meat). Horses are also not kosher because, while they chew the cud like all herd animals, they do not have a split hoof.

Other animals had special regulations. Nearly all fish were clean, as long as they had scales and fins. But sea creatures without scales and

fins, such as shellfish, eels, and squid, were unclean. No surf and turf in Israel. God also allowed the Israelites to eat locusts and grasshoppers but no other insects or “creeping things.” No snakes, snails, or puppy dog tails. No *escargot* or traditional Korean cuisine. There was also a rule against eating dairy and beef in the same meal. Even today, under Jewish kosher laws, they can eat a hamburger or they can eat cheese, but they cannot eat a cheeseburger because of an admonition against boiling a kid or calf in its mother’s milk (e.g., Ex. 23:19).

Are you overwhelmed yet? I’m just tapping the surface of the Jewish dietary laws and holiness codes of clean and unclean. Yet it is into this context that our lesson from Acts 10 takes place. The chapter begins with mention of a Roman centurion in Caesarea by the name of Cornelius who, even though he was not Jewish, nevertheless believed in the God of Israel. He was “a devout man who gave generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:2, ESV).<sup>2</sup> In a dream, God told this Cornelius to send for a man named Simon Peter in the

---

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

town of Joppa. Cornelius didn't know Peter from Adam, but for those of us familiar with the Gospels, we recognize this Simon Peter as the apostle Peter who was the leader of the early Church in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, God also appeared to *Peter* in a dream. Around lunchtime, Peter fell asleep on the roof of the house while waiting for lunch to be prepared. In this dream a great sheet (like a net) was let down from heaven containing "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air" (10:12). And a voice told Peter, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat" (v. 13). But Peter refused, declaring, "By no means, Lord; for I have *never* eaten anything that is common or unclean" (v. 14). As I said previously, the first Christians were all Jews who lived by the Kosher dietary laws. The text doesn't specify what unclean animals were present (besides the reptiles), but we may imagine snakes and crocodiles, bats and buzzards, swine and shrimp. Maybe even some cats and dogs! In any case, Peter refused to obey the Lord's command to dig in with his fork. Three times this scene played out in Peter's vision until the voice declared, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (v. 15).

Immediately, there was a knock at the door downstairs.

Cornelius's servants were there, urging for Peter to come and meet their master. Peter hesitated, but something about the dream and the strange visitors compelled him to go.

When they arrived at Cornelius's house, the Roman captain bowed down to worship Peter. But Peter raised him up by the wrist and said, "Stand up; I too am a man" (v. 26). Looking around the room, Peter saw that all of Cornelius's friends and family were gathered in the house. The place was *full* of Gentiles!

Peter addressed them: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean" (v. 28). Peter's dream was about clean and unclean *foods*, but now the Holy Spirit allowed him to perceive that it was *really* about clean and unclean *people*. The Jews regarded all Gentiles, especially the uncircumcised, as unclean. (Remember the Jewish man's morning prayer?!) As such, even though Israel was called to be a light to the nations, they took their light and hid it under a basket. The Jews disregarded Gentiles as

morally, racially, and culturally inferior. But what makes it all the more incredible is that the Jews believed their hatred of other people was a sign of their love for God.

But we digress—back to the story! Cornelius quickly told Peter why he sent for him, and lighting struck! Peter immediately realized that everything he believed about Gentiles was wrong—and that God was doing a new thing in Jesus. Peter opened his mouth and delivered the revolutionary sermon we hear in today’s reading: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). In other words, God doesn’t play favorites. He doesn’t love the Jews and hate the Gentiles. He loves every person he has made. So Peter opened up to Cornelius and his guests, gushing about the love of Jesus demonstrated by his death and resurrection, ending with this gospel appeal: “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through [Jesus’] name” (v. 43). *Everyone* who believes in Jesus can be saved—even Gentile dogs like Cornelius, like you, and like me.

While Peter was still preaching, the Holy Spirit came upon all who were gathered. They immediately began speaking in tongues and praising God for his wonderful gift of salvation. Peter was amazed. Could anybody stop them from being baptized? No, no they couldn't. Peter's life was transformed by the miracle of God's love for *all* people, even the ones he once (dis)regarded as unclean. And so they were baptized in the name of Jesus, and Peter *stayed* with them—under their roof!—for several days. Cornelius' family and friends were not the only ones whose hearts changed that day. God changed Peter's heart too. He melted the hard heart of Peter, whose name means “rocky,” and turned it into a heart of flesh, beating and pumping with the blood and love of Jesus.

Years later, another apostle—this time Paul—would write these words about God's universal welcome in Christ Jesus: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28; cp. Col. 3:11). Did you catch that? All the categories of people dismissed by the Jewish morning prayer—all the people supposedly excluded from God's

favor—are now brought near and made one in Christ. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman all made one in Christ. The beauty of the Gospel is that “God shows no partiality...” (Acts 10:34). God doesn’t play favorites—unless *everyone* is his favorite!

Now that’s all well and good, you might stay, but what does that have to do with *us today* in the twenty-first century? After all, we don’t face the same problems as the first century Church. Or do we?

First of all, this story should inspire within us a deep gratitude that we have been brought into the kingdom of God. With the exception of only a handful of our church members, very few of us are of Jewish descent. Most of us fall into the first-century category of “Gentile dogs” who were initially overlooked, unwanted, and dismissed from the kingdom. We are children of Abraham by faith, not by blood. We should rejoice that the God of Israel would have mercy upon us and seek us for his Church. This extraordinary encounter between Peter and Cornelius proves God’s love for *all* people, including you and me. Now we know that God doesn’t play favorites and people of *every* nation are welcome if they repent of their sin and put their trust in Jesus.

But here also is a call for repentance for each of us, because, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we also suffer from prejudices like Peter's. We may not divide the world into Jew and Gentile. But we still divide the world into categories of clean and unclean—people we like and people we hate and—even worse—people don't think about at all. Instead of Jew and Gentile, we see the world in terms of black and white. Instead of slave and free, we see rich and poor. While misogyny and unequal treatment of women still abounds in our post-modern times, we are more likely to divide people into categories of gay and straight, cis- and transgender, conservative and liberal. We forget that God is not a Democrat or a Republican. He doesn't care if somebody is a citizen, a resident alien, or an illegal immigrant. And even if somebody is a sex worker or a registered sex offender, God still loves them all the same. He "shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). He doesn't play favorites.

I remember a man at my previous congregation in Englewood, whom I will call "Steve." Steve was an alcoholic whom I met and invited to church on one of my many prayer canvasses of the

neighborhood. He actually accepted my invitation and showed up for worship the following Sunday. The only trouble is that Steve showed up drunk and smelling like cigarette smoke. Nobody but me would talk to him, so he sat in the back and spent most of the service crying. But he *came!*

One day Steve came up to me after church. Through his tears, he apologized for coming to church drunk. I nodded and put my hand on his shoulder to pronounce a strange form of absolution: “Steve, I forgive you. And so does God. But I would rather you come to church drunk than to come not at all.” He smiled and blubbered, shaking my hand. And the next Sunday he was back. And he came back nearly every Sunday morning right up until the weekend I bid farewell and came here to Epiphany. Steve was usually drunk or hungover when he came to church, but at least he came. He came because he knew that he was a sinner who had nothing going for him except for the grace of God. I tell you the truth: “Steve” and his ilk will enter the kingdom of God before many of you.

You see, sinners are God's kind of people. Jesus' opponents criticized him for going to too many parties with the wrong crowd (Luke 15:1-3). They called him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Luke 7:34). Christ himself told the Jewish religious leaders that "the tax collectors and *prostitutes* go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31). When I was a college student, I wrote a paper for my New Testament class titled "Jesus: Friend of Whores and Thieves." My professor thought the title was a little too incendiary, but I stand by it. For if Jesus *isn't* the friend of whores and thieves, then how in the world can I imagine he would ever be the friend of *me*?!

Does Christ approve of everything people do wrong? No, of course not. We're all sinners. And God takes sin seriously—deadly serious, which is why he sent his Son Jesus to die for our sins. Christ died to forgive sin, not to smooth it over. He told the woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you; go... and sin no more" (John 8:11). He told the paralyzed man, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5:14).

None of us *deserves* God's mercy. Yet he still sent his Son to die and rise again for us and our salvation. He gives us grace as a gift. We have no rights or righteousness of our own. He loves everyone and welcomes anyone who turns from their sin and returns to him for mercy and grace. "Everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). There are no exceptions. Because, as Chad Bird writes, if you put conditions on the Gospel, then it's not the Gospel anymore. It's just a new law. And whether that law is the Law of Moses or Jim Crowe, Sharia law or political correctness, it's still a law. As we confess in the Formula of Concord: the law always accuses (*lex semper accusat*). The law and our conscience condemn us. But Christ forgives and comforts us.

"This is my commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13). That's what Jesus did. He laid down his life for us—and for "them"—for all the reckless, undeserving, disgusting, good-for-nothing sinners in the world—even me. God doesn't show partiality. Jesus doesn't play favorites. "There

is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). What God has made clean by the blood of Jesus, do not call unclean (cf. Acts 10:15). Now, go eat a bacon cheeseburger to celebrate your freedom in Christ! *[pause]* Alleluia! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*