

“Food for Thought”
Acts 10:1-11:18
Rev. Curtis J. Young
July 6, 2008

*The text of this sermon may be used without first obtaining my permission. I do ask, however, that if you use any portion of the message for teaching or preaching preparations, that you would e-mail me a brief note to say you are making use of it. This would be a courtesy and help to me personally. You will note that in some sermons sections are bracketed between two sets of three asterisks (***) . The purpose is to delineate material that I did not preach, but that is integral to understanding the theology or exegesis of what was preached. My e-mail address is revyoung@comcast.net – Rev. Curt Young*

Acts 10 records the beginning of the great ingathering of Gentiles turning to Christ which continues to this day. The realization that the church reached in the case of Cornelius continues to this day, “So then God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” (11:18)

In fact when you read the story, it really is more about what took place in Peter’s life, and the church’s life, than Cornelius’ life. It is less about Cornelius’ conversion than about Peter’s transformation and the change in the church.

Cornelius greeted every step the Lord led him to take with unquestioning acceptance and eager anticipation -- from receiving the vision in which the angel told him to send a man named Peter; to his receiving this stranger with his family assembled; to their receiving the Gospel while Peter was still preaching so the Holy Spirit came upon them; to urging Peter to spend days with them after their baptism, no doubt to soak up all he taught them.

Peter’s story one of hesitation and misgivings finally giving way to shock and then, a need to defend what had happened.

He was given the heavenly vision of clean and unclean animals together, with the admonition, “Kill and eat.” To this responds, “Surely not, Lord!” The vision is repeated three times.

The three envoys arrive from Cornelius and calling out for him. He does not go down to receive them until the Spirit prompts him, “Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.” (vs. 20)

After arriving at Cornelius’ home and hearing his eagerness “to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us,” Peter begins by recording his amazement, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism...” (vs. 34) After the Spirit is given while he is preaching, he responds almost tentatively, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?” (47)

When he returns to Jerusalem (chapter 11), he is criticized for having entered the house of a gentile, and eaten with him in order to bring the Gospel to him. He repeats the entire account that Luke has just given us.

The question he poses at the end of his report, however, is far more firm than the concluding question he asked in verse 47. The meaning of the vision and all that God had led him to do and witness had gelled: “So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (11:17)

To this the church responded, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” (11:18)

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This passage teaches most memorably that for one person to come to Christ, the Spirit must not only work preventively (that is, in advance) in his life, but in the life of the Christian so that he brings the Gospel to him.

His work is no less necessary in the Christian who so he shares than in the hearer so he believes. The unbeliever must be helped to overcome his unbelief. The believer must be helped to overcome the prejudices and presumptions that keep him from sharing.

An entire branch of Christian theology, called apologetics, focuses on how to overcome the reluctance of the unbeliever to believe. Where is the branch of Christian theology that is just as focused on overcoming the believer’s reluctance to share?

The conflict that the work of God’s Spirit produced in Peter and the subsequent conflict in the church was far more than a blip on a screen. It was the beginning of a struggle.

Under pressure from what came to be known as the “circumcision party,” Peter himself would lapse at Antioch and withdraw from fellowship with believing Gentiles. It would be so serious that Paul would have to publicly oppose him. (Gal. 2:11)

The effort to oppose Gentile inclusion in the church would intensify to the point at which a council of the entire church was called at Jerusalem to address the matter. (Acts 15) Even after the church took a clear stand, opposition didn’t end.

We are mistaken if we understand this challenge to the truth of the Gospel from within the church as a simply a matter of Jewish influence. So that weaned from the biases of that tradition, the church was set free from its reluctance to share the Gospel with the world.

Let me ask you: Have you been delivered from reluctance to share the Gospel? Has Jesus’ Commission, “Go and make disciples of all the nations...” with its great promise, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.”, ended your reluctance...with people you know who need the Lord? Have you never ventured forth in obedience only to lapse as Peter did?

You and I may not be given Peter’s vision, but it is still food for thought for us. I may not receive a vision of a bowl full of geckos stalking one another, or a monitor lizard under glass glaring at me, or bugs in butter, alongside steak and salmon, on a beautiful tablecloth with the attendant command, “Get up, kill and eat.” But Peter’s realization is for us, too.

Luke stresses that Peter had to wonder about these things and to ponder them. The lessons we most take to heart are the conclusions we have reached after considerable thought. This was Peter’s: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.” (34)

It strikes me how simply and personally he put it. There is no high Kingdom theology here, but a conclusion about the nature of God that speaks so directly to the regard we show others.

Oh, there is a large body of theology in support of this, and it was fleshed out especially in Paul’s writings. How easy it is to bury ourselves in the details of that theology, to master its intricacies and

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debate its implications...just as the Jews were content to turn inward and focus on the details of their laws. There's more than one way to strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. (Matt. 23:24)

God does not show favoritism. With these words Peter received the challenge to leave behind the childish and destructive presumption, that Christ had come to him and called him because he was somehow more entitled, more worthy, more deserving, more loved, more special to the Lord than others, or that the members of his church were, or that his race was, or that his nation was.

Does this not speak directly to us: “How true it is that God does not show favoritism.”

I hear the debate. Who does God love? Does he love the elect only or the non-elect too? This is a red herring the devil uses to foster complacency, to support our reluctance to share Christ with people who are without him.

Here are the right questions, from Peter's own words: Does God show favoritism? The answer is “no”. Who, then, is acceptable to him? The answer is anyone who fears him and does what is right.”

But what does that mean? I ask because Peter's words ripped out of context have been used to argue that anyone of any religion who is sincere and upright is justified. This interpretation is contradicted within the story itself, not to mention the rest of the New Testament.

Peter was not announcing to Cornelius that he and his family were saved. He was testifying why he was free to share the Gospel with this gentile.

In chapter 11: 13-14, when Peter quotes the angel's words to Cornelius, clearly they convey the Roman's need for salvation. “Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.”

Peter was announcing that God welcomes people into his Kingdom, not irrespective of their faith, but irrespective of their wealth, status, race, nation, their past, their sin. When Peter asks in essence, “Who am I to withhold baptism from Cornelius?”, it is only because he had first settled a more fundamental question: “Who am I to withhold the Gospel from Cornelius?”

Who is the Gospel for? Who is God at work in preparing to become Christians? People you and I feel reluctant to share with.

The church concluded, “So, then, God has granted even the Gentile repentance unto life.” You can remove the word, “Gentile,” if you would like and insert who is most unlikely to you: “So, then, God has granted even _____ repentance unto life.” What does it take for you or me to cast aside our reluctance to share Christ?

Jesus gave Peter the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. With them he opened the door to the Jews at Pentecost and to the gentiles in Acts 10. But he was not the one Jesus used to reach the Gentiles.

No, that man was the one whose conversion was recorded in the previous chapter Acts 9, the Pharisee named Saul. Why him? Why not Peter?

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Only the Lord knows, but I would offer this observation. Peter went on to be known as the chief apostle. Along with John and James, our Lord’s brother, he was called a pillar of the church.

Paul would go on to testify with sincere conviction that he was not only the least of the apostles but the chief of sinners. “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance; Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am chief. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” (I Timothy 1:15-16) Paul had been saved to show the worst of men how accepting God is.

The chief sinner? No one was more convinced in his heart than Paul that God does not show favoritism. He was deeply persuaded as he looked at himself, that God had shown favor to him precisely because he does not show favoritism. If he did he would not have a chance.

Paul was the man who saw himself as one of those ugly lizards or bugs on the tablecloth that Peter saw, not as a beautiful gazelle or tasty lamb, but as one totally unworthy, loathsome apart from grace.

This is the person ideally suited to reach other creepy crawly things. He was willing, and he was able. He felt no reluctance, no revulsion.

What’s more he was convinced of that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, and all are welcome to partake. He was persuaded of that this is what the Lord uses to pry open people’s hearts and grant the repentance unto life.

What does it take to see ourselves that way, sincerely, as a creepy crawly thing rather than something choice and desirable? The price Christ had to pay to make us acceptable, the dying he had to suffer and the death he had to endure to atone for our sins.

The Lord desired me not because I was desirable. The Lord showed me favor not because he shows favoritism but to witness to his desire for the undesirable, and his favor to the least likely.

Here is the work of grace that is so necessary in my life to overcome every prejudice and every reluctance so, as necessary for salvation of others as his work of grace in the unbeliever’s heart.