

“The Word of God in a World of Prejudice”
Sermon delivered May 2, 2010
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Neal Collins, Pastor

Acts 11:1–18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Prejudice

The Word of the Lord in a world of prejudice is a difficult to swallow. First, of all none of us think of ourselves as being prejudiced. No, I am not going to focus on your prejudices this morning, because most of us having difficulty hearing such words. I am not going to talk about my own prejudices, because I don't know how. So, I will turn the prejudice written in our first reading this morning with the opening words “the circumcised believer criticized (Peter) saying...³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Eating with “them” was a sign of acceptance of “them”.

Us vs. Them

We live in an us/them world. How often do “we” catch ourselves talking about they/them? We cannot help it. As a bumper sticker in Pennsylvania reads, “I am for whoever beats Penn State.” In a world of prejudice, we define ourselves more by what we not than what we are. An ancient Jewish prayer reads, “O God, I thank you for not creating me a woman.” Truth often reveals more about “us” than about reality of “them”. Truth that served us well at age, 5 when our mothers told us not to cross the street without holding the hand of an adult, doesn’t hold water at age 55. Unless you are in love! Prejudice can blind us with our preconceived ideas of how God and the world are to operate, according to our gospel, of what is right, good, and fair. This is a difficult barrier to break in an “us/them” world.

Sins of the Fathers

Some of us follow the prejudice of our families; the sins of the fathers (and mothers) are passed to the third and fourth generation. I come from family with a grandfather whose attitude toward blacks and other races cannot be repeated here. He was a man of his times. Some of us are challenged to hear a different religious/political/social point of view. If you grew up in Minnesota 30 years ago and your daughter came home announcing she is marrying Joseph and the wedding would be at St. Mary’s Catholic Church you would probably be speaking in tongues and it wouldn’t be biblical! The problems with prejudice it can wraps us up into a myopic world of our own fantasies and deprives us of the richness of the world, and God’s presence in that world. So, the question is not, “am I prejudiced”, but how. Instead of looking to closely at ourselves, let us turn to Peter.

Step by Step

Let us turn to the prejudice of Peter, and the early church in Jerusalem. It is important for you to know that the Gospels are primarily Jewish Books, written by Jews and for Jews, working out their understanding of God in this Jesus, as the chosen people. Christianity was a form of Judaism; the split didn’t come until later when the followers of the way got kicked out of the synagogue for its popularity. Please understand they didn’t have the separation barrier, as we know it in Israel today. So, the Gentile was the “them”. The Jews lived in a Gentile world. They were able to do this because they had rites of purification to become clean again. However, word got back to Jerusalem before Peter returned that he had fellowship with “them.” The Gentiles. He said, let me explain it “step by step”.

The first step, he explained, was when he was in Joppa after he had raised Tabitha from the dead, and was staying in the home of Simon the tanner. He went up on the rooftop to pray, and he fell asleep. (I am certain this has never happened to any of you!) His stomach started churning, hunger pangs for some bread, goat cheese, and olives. In the vision Peter sees food lowered from heaven on a sheet - poultry, fish, and beef - all considered unclean according to his custom. The Lord said to get up, kill, and eat. Peter said, ‘NO’!!!! I have never eaten anything unclean! The Lord responds saying “do not call impure what God has made clean.” Of course, this has nothing to do with eating a cheeseburger and drinking a milkshake.

I have often wondered what it was like for Peter when I am in a situation of going from Joppa to Caesarea in my own life. I wonder if Peter just accepted it and did it, or did he struggle with the hard drive of his soul? I know he struggled after this visit to Caesarea, like you and I struggle to stretch into a new way of being with the unknown and unpredictable. Did Peter think about the outcome of this visit? His worst fears became a reality when he got back to Jerusalem.

God prepared Peter to receive a request from Cornelius, for the Lord appeared to Cornelius in a visit by an angel to invite Peter (included in the previous chapter). Before a large gathering he said, "You are well aware that is against "our" law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him but, (hear the BUT?) I should not call anyone unclean." Peter told the story of Jesus knowing that God shows no favorites. The Holy Spirit was poured out, and Peter baptized them. Of course this caused a stir with the hometown folks in Jerusalem because the "them" was becoming an "us".

Imagine the Lord dropping a vision on you while you are praying/sleeping. A large sheet comes down with representations of all the ideas, prejudice, and people you don't like, people who have done you wrong and your own stereotypes of them. The Lord declares clean what you have considered unclean. What do you do? There is nothing you can do if you omit the Spirit of the Lord acting in your life. We can no more get rid of our prejudices than a computer can defrag itself. This can only happen when "God is the Ground of our Lives." When we live in the fullness of power and the presence of God can this happen. Boot strap theology, ethics, good intentions will not hold up in the face of prejudice. We can acknowledge our prejudice, pray, and wait.

Waiting for the Spirit of the Lord to call us into the new chapter of life we often resist because we cling to the old and the familiar. We are waiting for the power of God to invite us into the wholeness of life through reconciliation as a result of struggling with our own demons and critics. Waiting for our life to be opened up so we can experience the fullness of God as Jesus, Paul, Peter, Mary, Lydia experienced the fullness of God. The Lord removes the log from your own eye so you may see the presence of his kingdom in the world. Wait and See, wait and be open, wait for the Joy Jesus wants you to have.