

Lake Shore Baptist Church

Sermon January 12, 2010

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Title: When the Good News is Good News

Text: Acts 10:34-43

At the beginning of today's lectionary text from Acts, Jesus' disciple, Peter, makes an absolutely radical statement. He says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

"God shows no partiality."

It's so easy to just pass by words of Scripture. Words that some of us have heard all our lives. But we dare not become numb to the radical nature of what Peter said. Peter was an observant Jew, an ethnic Jew, a Jew who lived in a country ruled by the oppressive hand of Roman puppet rulers, a land where Jews would have to be raised *up* to "second-class" citizenship. He had been raised in a tradition that blatantly and unapologetically claimed that Jews, his people, were a special people specifically chosen by God.

Yet, Peter says "God shows no partiality." What in the world was going on here?

Let's look at what happened before this text and see if we can find some clues.

Acts Chapter 10 begins with the story of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius was a good man, he believed in God, and he put his money and his time where his mouth was. He also encouraged his entire household to do the same.

Cornelius has a vision. God tells him to send some folks to Joppa and look for someone named Peter. So, he does so. I guess I would have, too.

While Cornelius's folks are on the road to Joppa from Caesarea, Peter has a dream, too. His is different from Cornelius's. He sees a big sheet coming down from heaven suspended by its corners. On the sheet he sees nothing but all kinds of animals. There's just one problem. These are all, every one of them, animals he's been taught all his life to avoid, animals that are unclean, unfit to touch, absolutely unfit to eat.

So, what happens next? He hears a voice say, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat." It's hard for us to fully comprehend what those words meant to an observant 1st century Jew, a member of a tradition where a person's very identity was caught up in the religious practices of their faith.

Peter responds in the way any good Jew would. He says he will not, he shall not, he cannot. It's just not in him to violate the dietary laws. He's not going to behave like a Gentile, for gosh sakes!

And then the voice says, *three times* the voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Scripture says Peter was greatly puzzled. That might be the understatement of the century. He's being led somewhere he's never gone before. He's being challenged to consider his faith in a totally new way. No more closed doors. No more insider language. No more tribal boundaries. But lots of new questions. What will a mixed community look like? How will they talk about faith? What practices will they retain? Which will they cast off?

Greatly puzzled? I guess so.

It's this vision that leads Peter to the words of *today's* text. So, Peter goes back with Cornelius's folks to Caesarea. Because of this dream. Because the voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Can you imagine all that was going through his mind on that trip? What's he going to say to this Roman centurion? What are his people going to think? He's going to be shunned for sure by many in his community. But he decides to go. And he began his words to Cornelius with these: "God shows no partiality."

I read an article this week about Ed Orgeron, the football coach of the LSU Tigers. They've had an incredible season and are playing for the national championship tomorrow night. (Yes, I'm planning to be in front of my tv.) Coach O, as he's called, has had an interesting journey as a coach. He's been well-regarded for his work, but there have always been questions about him because of his speech. I thought about bringing a sound clip to play for you. His accent is deeply Cajun. He almost needs subtitles for folks to know what he's saying. Last week in the New York Times there was an essay about him called "The Cajun Yogi Berra." It was said that Orgeron was not promoted to head coach at the University of Southern California in 2013, despite a 6-2 record as interim coach, because U.S.C. officials "couldn't get past what Ed Orgeron sounded like." He didn't seem to fit Southern California culture.

Cultural differences are deep within our psyches and our social structures.

Hear this story from our own Steve Gardner:

"I arrived in Astana, Kazakhstan, late at night on September 20, 2007. I was dead tired from the travel and was going to speak at

a conference that would be nationally televised the next morning, sharing the podium with four other people, one of whom was the prime minister. I was picked up at the airport by a deputy prime minister who told me that we would be going to a restaurant to have a late dinner. I told him that I had eaten on the plane, and that I really needed to get to the hotel to have a few hours of sleep. But my request had little effect, and we continued to the restaurant, which had been held open late for me, and there were about ten other people waiting with a table FULL of food (that I didn't really want to eat late at night).

But we exchanged toasts, and I ate what I could. And then, during dinner, the deputy prime minister explained quietly (in Russian): "I know that you would have preferred to go straight to the hotel, but we *had* to do this. We come from a nomadic culture, and traditionally, if a traveler arrived at your tent in the desert, you would always extend hospitality by giving them something to eat and drink before you would put them to bed. You would wait until the next morning to ask, now tell me about the world out there..."

China implemented a one-child policy in 1979. It was an attempt to keep their population from further exploding. The law had terrible consequences for families: forced sterilizations, forced abortions, children removed from families. The one-child policy combined with the cultural preference for male children has had terrible consequences. There are literally millions of men of child-rearing age in China who will never marry because there are now over thirty-three million more men than women. These single men are called things like "bare branch," "single dog," or "leftover man."

A Vietnamese woman came to the United States as a refugee. She had often come to visit with a particular family and they often grilled hamburgers. A typical American way to host folks. It was some time before she finally found the courage to tell them that

the smell of beef being grilled literally made her sick to her stomach. She was asked if she liked to eat pork. She said, yes, she did, but she liked dog even more.

Cultural difference is everywhere.

It was at least partly cultural difference (and maybe economics) that led theologians to support slavery in the 19th century. It was cultural difference that led to Jim Crow. It was cultural difference that kept women from voting in this country until 1920. It was cultural difference that led to laws against mixed-race marriage. It was cultural difference (along with bad theology) that led to the illegality of same-sex marriage. It's cultural difference that leads to increasing restrictions on legal immigration. I can go on and on.

The gospel is not a cultural call. It is a universal call. The Lordship of Christ is open to all, regardless of race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, age, physical and mental ability, national origin, economic station, or political ideology.

What was going on when Peter went to see Cornelius? Peter lays out the central core of Jesus' message as he knew it. "Jesus is Lord, anointed by God. He died and rose again. I and my friends are witnesses to these truths. Jesus calls us to carry this message and Jesus has called me to bring this message to you today." Peter's *very presence* with Cornelius is the gospel acted out in real time.

It looks like maybe Peter noticed when Jesus healed outsiders, such as another centurion's servant, or when he healed the gentile with mental illness, or when Jesus talked about a good Samaritan, or when Jesus healed outcasts such as lepers, or healed the heart of a wicked tax collector named Zacchaeus.

Maybe Peter had heard about Jesus first sermon, where he advocated care for the poor and for foreigners and was run out of town. And maybe Peter remembered Jesus's very last words before he left them: that they would be witnesses to the "very ends of the earth." That sounds like everybody to me.

Like us, if we're honest, it took Peter a while to catch on to what Jesus's mission to *all* people was really about.

There are reasons it's hard for us to embrace the kind of change that came to Peter, the kind of change that God calls all of us to embrace. It's especially hard when it comes to being open to those outside our identity groups. It's a part of how we're wired biologically. Moral psychologists and neuro-scientists have explored this using brain wave measurement and other means. We're wired to be loyal to our group. It's a part of how we've progressed as we have as the human race. Our minds are trained to analyze, sort, and categorize constantly. Our brains are both biologically wired and brilliantly trained to do so. And we do so based on *culture* as much as anything.

But, as our text shows, that's not always the way of the gospel.

But the gospel is countercultural. Jesus reached out over and over to gentiles, to the outcast, to the marginalized, to the hurting, to those who thought differently. And this same Jesus told Peter to "kill and eat." The gospel message that Peter gives in today's text is for *all*, not just for some. And we're called to act as if that is truly so.

It's good news Peter brings. Good news for everybody. Good news of peace and forgiveness. Important news. And it seems to me that Peter's vision brought him to this question: If the good news isn't good news for everybody, is it good news for anybody?

This story is often referred to as Cornelius's conversion. And it certainly was. But Peter has been converted as well. They've both been transformed by the power of the gospel. A gospel that has no boundaries, excludes no one, is open to all. Peter has spent a lifetime of being convinced that he was part of a select group. It took the transformative intervention of God to finally convince him of a new truth and then *act on it*.

Peter's conversion was just as dramatic as Cornelius's, maybe more so. God called Peter to give up something incredibly central to his very identity. God was calling Peter to give up a huge part of how he interacted with God. The dietary laws were crucial to how Jews lived their lives as God's children. To give them up was to give up a significant way in which they actually viewed God, how they practiced their faith. It was a call from God to give up even more than just their usual customs. God was calling Peter to sacrifice a way of looking at God.

God was calling Peter to discard some cultural uniqueness, to transcend cultural difference.

It's fairly easy for us to look outside the walls of the church and say there are folks who need to transcend cultural differences. It's easy to look at where we are and say, "Aren't we glad we've already done such important work. At least we're not like church x or church y or church z."

I'm certainly not a sociologist and I didn't stay in a Holiday Inn Express last night, but I've been around a few blocks. I like to think I notice things.

When I was in the academy working as a faculty member and dean, I noticed some interesting behavior. I discovered I was part of gang culture. You know how I knew I was in a gang? We had gang colors. Some people wore light blue, some scarlet, some

dark blue, some pink. Some wore other colors. The colors denoted our tribes. Dark blue, philosophy; light blue, Education; brown, Business; scarlet, Theology; etc. As a musician, I had to wear pink. I don't really like pink. I always used to ask, "Why can't someone else wear pink? I really like blue." But when I became a theologian, I got to wear scarlet. I like scarlet.

We were all part of a larger culture, but the colors denoted micro-cultures within that larger culture.

And during my years in the academy and my years in churches I also learned something else. Groups don't divide into just one set of micro-cultures. There are lots of micro-cultures and they overlap each other. Every group, organization, and institution is made up of networks of not just individuals, but networks of micro-cultures. Groups that have certain expectations about how things should go, groups that have varying histories and practices and traditions and objectives.

All of which need to be examined, measured, and considered.

Just like Peter's culture, micro-cultures have differences that need transcending. Differences that need to be acknowledged, talked about, and both celebrated and managed. Differences that we're called to question, just like Peter was called to question his entire lifetime of Jewishness.

Lake Shore, what might God be calling *us* to question during this time of transition? As individuals? As micro-cultures? What ways of looking at the world, what ways of doing church, what ways of interacting with each other, what ways of actually seeing and being open to God are we willing to look at and examine. What might God be calling us to leave behind? Which of these will we intentionally keep?

And what might each of us, the preacher included, be called to examine and walk away from as all of us work to let Christ indwell our hearts and our actions?

May God give us the wisdom, the courage, and the grace to look at ourselves honestly, graciously, and with the eyes of God's Spirit as the days unfold. Amen.