

August 27, 2017

Lesson 13: Called to Be Inclusive

Scripture: Acts 10: 19-33

Context:

In our last scripture lesson for this summer, we conclude with another dramatic conversion story in the Book of Acts. So far we have read of how the early church is growing to include all sorts of people; righteous saints like Stephen, the apostles like Peter, the former “enemy” Saul, the foreigner like the Ethiopian eunuch, and now Cornelius, a wealthy Roman centurion. In the beginning of chapter ten, we meet Cornelius, a wealthy Roman centurion who was a “God-fearer” and is a part of the local community. He is even known for giving alms to the needy. Cornelius one day has a vision from God where he told to go and find Simon Peter.

The next scene is Peter who is praying on the roof of a home. He has a vision where a sheet is lowered down and there are all sorts of animals on it. Peter is told to slaughter and eat them by a voice three times. And each time that Peter refuses to keep dietary laws, the voice repeats: “What God has made clean, you must not profane.” The vision subsides and Peter is left confused. As someone who was following Jesus, yet still a Jew by custom and tradition, these instructions strike at the chord of who Peter’s identity. Following the sacred dietary laws and not intermarrying was important to the Jewish community of that time. Assimilation into any other culture or way of being was a difficult change that struck at the DNA of all those involved. Thus, Peter is left scratching his head as to why God would give him this vision.

As Peter scratches his head, a group of Cornelius’ messengers arrive at Joppa. The Spirit moves within Peter and instructs him to invite these men into the home. As they sit down and tell their story, there is the invitation for Peter to come to Caesarea. Some of the believers from Joppa set out with Peter and the messengers to meet with Cornelius. At a gathering in his home with friends and family, Cornelius prepares to welcome and receive Peter. After explaining that Cornelius is not to worship him, Peter addresses the community and talks about God showing him that he is not to call a person impure or unclean. He is here following God’s orders.

As Cornelius tells him about the vision, he also asks for him to talk about the Lord and explain everything. What follows is a sermon from Peter and then the Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentiles with people speaking in tongues and praising God. Then, the people are baptized, brought into the family of God. Who are Peter or the others to say that God cannot claim when clearly God is right there in the midst of it all?

Application:

There’s almost no need for background for what is going on in the midst of these conversations as the characters make it clear for us that diversity in the body of Christ even in the early church was a struggle. There were those who still believed to the mindset of being “Jewish” enough for being a part of the church. Then there were those on the outside who were not in because they did not follow certain dietary restrictions or

have certain religious backgrounds. In the midst of it all God speaks out to both groups and makes sure that all are brought into the body of Christ.

The theme of conversion once again shows up in this text. God changes both individuals, but a particular focus is on Peter. Peter has done everything he is supposed to do: he followed Jesus all the way to the cross, still kept the Jewish dietary restrictions, and continued to lead the Jerusalem church. But God isn't done with him yet. It's now time for him to see that the good news of Jesus Christ belongs to the Gentiles, those people who don't follow the dietary or marriage laws of the people. While we may at first shrug our shoulders at someone now being able to eat pork and marry anyone of any race, imagine your own taboos that you think of when it comes to who can be a part of the church. Is everyone welcome in your community of faith? Think about the people you don't see sitting beside you in your pew or chair on Sunday. You don't have to imagine too hard to realize that we have all sorts of little clues as to who we think should be in our pews or our Sunday school classes. I wonder who God may be calling you to reach out to? Maybe it's time to stop hiding and realizing that God is calling you to see someone as a child of God instead of a stranger to chide.

Recently I talked to a retired clergy about this text. He told me the story of growing up in Montgomery as a young man. As a white teen he was able to get on the buses without a problem. Day in and day out he would get on the bus and watch as the lines would change for there to be more seats for the whites who got on the bus. He saw at the stations that "Whites Only" were all over the water fountains and bathrooms. But something changed. On Dec. 1, 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus and thus the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. He felt convicted; God put in his mind that this was not right. The color of your skin shouldn't determine where you sit on a bus or where you drink your water. It also shouldn't determine where you worship our Lord or if you can preach to people who have a different skin color from you. The Lord showed him that he needed to teach and treat people with respect.

In our conversation, he said he hopes that people can read this pericope and remember that God can and will constantly convert us. Who are we as a people to say that God can't work through a person for whatever arbitrary thing we fixate upon and say that it make them unfit to serve, lead, or just be included? We may even think we have the scriptures to say: "Well 1 Corinthians clearly states..." Have we not then fallen into the same dilemma as Peter had all those years on the roof in Joppa? If we continue to judge and say who is worthy to be in our churches or lead our churches, we have taken the place of God and we have placed limits on whom God calls and what God can do.

Respectfully,
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