

Introduction

Last week we finished our long journey in the Gospel of Matthew with the final words of Matthew: the Great Commission. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

This command is as real for us today as it was for the eleven disciples who heard it. Thankfully, we are given plenty of examples of how these disciples, and the early church that they created, lived out this Great Commission. The rest of the New Testament is exactly that. Mostly, the rest of the New Testament is a series of letters written by Paul, Peter, John, and James. But before we get to the letters, there’s a book that tells the stories of these people who wrote these letters. That book is called Acts, short for the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Acts is actually a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, as Luke is the author of both and Acts is more like the second act of his Gospel story. It tells the story of how this early church, empowered by the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit, grows, how it’s persecuted, and how the treasure that the church had, the Gospel of Jesus, spread around the Mediterranean. In the midst of the spreading of the Gospel around the known world was a major conflict. Even the earliest church had conflict and was split over issues. The issue of the day was whether or not Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jewish. Christianity at this point felt like slightly different Judaism, it was largely made up of Jews, and they had to figure out how they were going to make disciples of all

nations. Folks like Peter thought Gentiles had to become Jews in order to become Christians. Folks like Paul thought that imposing some laws on Gentiles, especially laws like circumcision, would drive Gentiles away from the Good News. Keep this conflict in mind.

Peter

So over the next two Sundays, we'll dig around Acts to learn about two key figures in the early church: Peter and Paul. Today, we talk about Peter.

We've learned and read about Peter before, specifically about his role in the Transfiguration story. Peter was always anxious to show Jesus he was loyal, but like all of us who try to be loyal to Jesus, he stumbled several times. Then, at the beginning of Acts, we have the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was gifted to the disciples so they could do the work of the Great Commission. We can't do the work of the Gospel without the Holy Spirit.

After this gift, Peter is a different person. He becomes a great preacher of the Good News, but he is far from perfect. He is continually taught and led by the Holy Spirit. Becoming a Christian, being filled with the Holy Spirit, is only the start of a journey, it is not the destination. And so, for Peter in the book of Acts, there are still several crucial lessons he needs to learn. Today's may be the most important.

God's Prep Work

God's lesson for Peter doesn't actually start with Peter, but with a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. A centurion was a leadership position in the Roman military. Centurions were visible signs of Rome's oppressive power in the region. Cornelius was stationed in a city called Caesarea, a coastal city in Israel that was a central hub for Roman occupation in the region. We are told that Cornelius feared God (meaning he believed in the one true God), gave alms generously, and prayed constantly to God. Cornelius has a vision of an angel of the Lord, in which he is told to send for a man in Joppa named Peter.

The next day, Peter also receives a vision. He's about to pray, and he's really hungry, and he goes into a trance and sees this vision of a large sheet being lowered, and on this sheet are all kinds of animals. A voice says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

Peter thinks this is a test. You can't fool Peter! Peter says, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice responds with a profound and simple statement that changed the church forever and should challenge all of us today. The voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." There were a ton of foods that were considered unclean in Judaism, and Peter never ate those things. This vision told him that if God calls something, even previously unclean food, clean, then it's clean.

But Peter doesn't quite get this vision. God gave him this great sermon illustration, but Peter doesn't understand how it ties into the message. But God's message was on its way.

As Peter is still thinking about what this vision means, the men Cornelius sent arrive. Good timing. While we didn't read the whole chapter, what happens next is that Peter joins these men and heads to Caesarea to meet Cornelius. Peter was going to Caesarea, enemy territory, the central hub of Roman occupation of Israel. Caesarea was literally named after Caesar Augustus and had all sorts of pagan temples, including a temple to Caesar. If any place was unclean and profane in the Holy Land, it was this city. And God calls Peter to go to Caesarea to meet Cornelius, and man whose outward appearance would tell you that he is also unclean and profane. I wonder if on his way to Caesarea if Peter started to get that this vision was about more than just food...

Peter meets Cornelius, and after they interact, Peter gets the message. He begins a sermon with this: "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." He continues on to tell the story of Jesus and as he is speaking the Holy Spirit falls upon all who heard the word. I want to read with you again how Peter speaks plainly about the Good News: "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and

healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” Peter knows the Gospel so well that he can share it succinctly and powerfully.

After the sermon, the text says that the circumcised believers - the ones who believed that you had to become ceremonially Jewish first to become a Christian - were amazed that Gentiles were receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit was not and is not and will never be confined to the differences and borders that we try to impose on it. God shows no partiality. That vision wasn't just about the food that was called unclean, it was also about the people that were formerly called unclean. What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

Now this doesn't mean that the Old Testament laws were wrong. It doesn't mean that God made a mistake when he gave the Law and told the chosen people what to eat and not eat. This is about the power of God's redemption in Jesus Christ. This is about Jesus fulfilling the Law and the Prophets in expanding the power of the Gospel to *all* people, to *all* nations. This is the power of

Christ's resurrection. It's no longer about who is clean and unclean; it is now about who fears God and does what is right and acceptable to him, and who doesn't. In the words of Paul in Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

This story shows us that. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, it's no longer Peter the Jew and Cornelius the Gentile, or Peter the insider and Cornelius the outsider, it is now two people who are one in Christ Jesus.

This truth is why my heart ached so badly last week when a 19-year-old man walked into the Chabad Community Center Synagogue in California and opened fire on a group of worshipping Jews. The loss of life, the terror, the violence, all terrible. All heartbreaking. But we found out later in the week that this shooter wrote a manifesto. He was raised a Christian. In this manifesto, he clearly articulated Christian doctrine. He believed that he was called to kill Jews. He believed there were insiders and outsiders and that it was right for insiders to hurt outsiders. We cannot hide from this kind of hate, we cannot say that this kind of hate only happens in other religions or in other countries. This young man was raised in a Presbyterian denomination, his father was an elder, and he went to church every week. And he believed it was good and right to kill. There is not a person in our world who is not created in the image of God, there is not a person in our world who is outside of the ability to become one in Christ, there is not a person in our world who is not deeply loved and cherished by our

creator, there is not a person in our world who is outside the redeeming and restorative power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, there is not a person in our world that the Holy Spirit would refuse to fall upon. There is not a person or group of people in our world worth killing. I wish we lived in a world where I didn't have to articulate that from the pulpit of a church of Jesus Christ. But, that world has not yet come. Until it does, we are called to live our of love and hope and not out of hate and fear.

We have so much to learn from this story in Acts. The Good News of Jesus Christ is available to everyone. If we believe in the Good News, the Gospel, we are called to share it with everyone; we aren't called to shun or hurt those who do not yet know the Gospel.

For us

We can learn much from this story. Both Peter and Cornelius are good examples for how we should live because both play a role in changing the other's life.

Maybe some of us here are like Cornelius. We believe in God, we are good people, but we don't quite know the full power of the Gospel. Maybe we are brand new to this faith, like Cornelius, and we want to learn more. You know what's amazing? God can use you. If you think to yourself you relate to Cornelius, look at how God uses Cornelius to teach Peter, who's been a Christian as long as anyone else alive at this point. Cornelius's faithfulness helps Peter grow. If you're sitting there and are new to faith or are

curious about faith, stay curious and know that God can use you in powerful ways.

Or maybe some of us are like Peter. We have been Christians all our lives, or at least for a long time. We've experienced the transforming power of the Gospel in our lives. God can use you, too. If you think to yourself that you relate to Peter in this story, look at how much more there is for you to learn. Look at the room to grow. If you're sitting there and have been a Christian your whole life, I encourage you to be humble like Peter. Peter in this story is a missionary. He is called to preach the Good News to people who hadn't heard it yet. He speaks, and a whole bunch of people receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized. But he is also taught and missionized. He learns more about Christ's transforming power from Cornelius. He is open to learning from someone else. He is an insider who learns from someone he once considered an outsider.

The story has Cornelius and Peter, but the main character in this story is God. God provides both men visions of what to do next so that the Gospel can be spread to the whole world. All of us, whether we relate more to Cornelius or Peter, need to be open to God's vision. We need to be open in prayer and worship to God leading us. If we are truly interested in spreading the Gospel, God will lead us to uncomfortable places. Peter was sent to Caesarea, which I imagine is the last city in Israel Peter would have wanted to go. And yet, Peter goes. Will you?

My prayer is that this story challenges us to rethink whom we view as insiders and outsiders. Cornelius would have been considered an outsider, and God uses him to teach Peter, who would have been considered an insider. I want you to picture a person who you would consider an outsider. You may be thinking of someone who is drastically different than you in appearance or religion or political stance or language or class. That person is a beloved child of God. That person is created in the image of God. That person is not outside of the transforming power of Christ. How will you love that person this week? How might God be transforming you, as God transformed Peter, to be a shining light of the Gospel in that person's life? And how might God be working in them, God worked in Cornelius, to teach you?