

To the Gentiles Also

In the name of him who is making all things new, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel, we hear Jesus telling his disciples that he has many more things to say to them, but that they aren't ready to hear those things just yet. It will only be later, after the Holy Spirit comes upon them, that they will be led to understand all the truth that Jesus has to teach them. And today's account from the Book of Acts gives us a perfect example of one of these "to be revealed later" teachings coming to them.

A disturbing report has reached the Church at Jerusalem. It concerns the Apostle Peter, who has been away for several weeks visiting with fellow believers in some of the cities and towns on the seacoast of Judea. The story is that while in Caesarea, Peter engaged in what can only be described as absolutely scandalous behavior. Many in the Church are shocked beyond belief that a man with Peter's standing could have sunk so low and committed a crime so disgusting. Thus it is that when Peter returns to Jerusalem, they immediately hold a hearing before an assembly of the Church in order to have him answer the charges against him. His offense? That he, who was born and raised an observant Jew, went into the home of uncircumcised Gentiles and actually shared meals together with them. Unbelievable.

Okay, maybe not so unbelievable to us. After 2000 years of Church history, we're rather used to the idea that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. But to those first Christians, all of whom were of Jewish descent, it was a huge hurdle to overcome. And to understand why it was so difficult for them, you have to try to get into their mindset.

So, let's do that. Imagine yourself a faithful Jew living back then. You are keenly aware that you one of God's chosen people. This truth has been pounded into you from the time of your birth. You descend from the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord has set you apart from all other peoples, and he has made his special covenant with you. And God has given you a code of conduct handed down at Mount Sinai which dictates that you dress differently, that you behave differently, and most notably that you eat differently than all the other peoples on earth. Yes, there are lots of things those Gentiles eat which are categorically prohibited to you. You've been taught that these foods are unclean. And so at even the thought of eating them, for you the ick factor is off the charts.

Take it is step farther now. It seems rather obvious to you that because the Gentiles do eat these foods that are unclean, they themselves must be unclean. And there are other things that make Gentiles unclean. To name but one, it's known that sometimes Gentile women abort their babies – they don't have our sense of respect for the sanctity of human life. And typically they do this in their own homes. As a faithful Jew, you know that according to the Law of Moses the presence of a dead body defiles a place and makes it unclean. The Lord gave us certain rituals to cleanse our homes after someone dies; but the Gentiles don't; which means their homes are perpetually unclean – as unclean as any tomb. And anyone who enters such a defiled place becomes himself unclean.

For these and other reasons, it's inconceivable that any Jew would willingly enter the home of a Gentile. But to then sit with them, fellowship them, and break bread together—actually have table fellowship with them, something you reserve for only your family and closest

Jewish friends, and then to eat unclean foods off of unclean plates – ugh! Just thinking of it makes you want to vomit. Got the picture?

Okay, but let's ask *why* the Lord gave his people a particular code of conduct that governed such things as what they were to wear and what kinds of meat they were allowed to eat. Mind you, we're not talking about laws that have to do with morality, that is, basic questions of right and wrong. Even Gentiles know that it's wrong to lie, to steal, to commit murder, and so on. No, what we're talking about are the other rules and regulations that God gave his people which applied to them and to them only. These rules have nothing to do with right and wrong. I mean, why is it okay to eat beef and lamb but not pork or rabbit? Remember that after the flood, the Lord told Noah and his family that *all* living creatures could be considered as food. Nothing was forbidden. But then later, at Sinai, the Lord gave the Israelites a long list of creatures that they weren't allowed to eat. Why?

The answer is that the Lord wanted to keep his people separate from the other nations. He gave them rules that pretty much forced them to live apart. If you can't eat with people, you can't mix with them, or more importantly *intermarry* with them. What the Lord was doing in giving these rules was to isolate his people. He did it for two reasons: first so that they'd be less likely to adopt the other nation's pagan idolatry, and second in order to preserve intact and undefiled the bloodline through which in the fullness of time he would bring the Christ into the world. And this worked – at least it did for the comparatively small remnant of his people who kept the covenant. Others throughout Israel's history did not keep the covenant and ended up being assimilated into the nations. They and their descendants ceased to be God's people.

But now that the Christ had already come and performed his mission to give his life as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world, it was no longer necessary to protect the bloodline that led to him. Moreover, since Jesus died for the sins of all peoples, the Lord wants all peoples to hear about it so that they can come to faith and be saved – which means that he had to drop the restrictions that kept his people apart from the other nations. Now he wanted his people, in particular the Jews who believed in Jesus, to mix and intermingle. How else were they to perform the great commission to make disciples of all nations?

This explains the vision that the Lord gave to Peter while he was in Joppa. The Apostle is praying, and a falling into a trance he sees a sheet descend from heaven full of animals that Jews were not allowed to eat. A voice calls to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat!" The very thought of it offends Peter. "No way!" he protests. "Nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth." The voice responds, "What God has made clean, do not call common." The vision is repeated two more times. And you have to believe that each time Peter objected more strenuously to the command. And each time the voice replied stronger still that it wasn't up to Peter to decide what was or wasn't clean. If God has declared these things clean, don't you presume to argue with him.

Coming out of the trance, Peter sits there baffled, wondering what *that* was all about. He finds out soon enough. Three Gentile men are calling on him at the house where Peter is staying. They've been sent from a Roman centurion named Cornelius whose home is up the coast a ways at Caesarea. They've come with instructions to fetch the Apostle and bring him to their master. Peter has never heard of the guy. He's surprised that this Roman officer knows who *he* is. And he hasn't the foggiest notion about why Cornelius would want to see him. At this point the thought hasn't entered into the head of any of the Apostles that when Jesus said to take the Gospel to all nations, he meant the *people* of all nations. They thought he meant only

to the Jews who happened to be living out scattered among the nations. They thought this good news about Jesus is for God's chosen people, people like us, not for nasty Gentiles.

So naturally Peter is extremely reluctant to go with these three men. Jews simply don't travel or hang out with unclean and uncircumcised Gentiles. So the Holy Spirit practically shoves him, saying, "Go with them. Don't make the usual distinctions between Jew and Gentile." To Peter this sounds so fundamentally wrong. Picture him and the six other Jewish men who accompanied him dragging their feet while making the 30 mile journey – which was long enough that they wouldn't be able to make it in a day, especially since they started out shortly after noon. That means they would have had to stay overnight someplace along the way – Jews and Gentiles together in the same place.

The next day they arrive at the home of Cornelius. Peter and his companions are invited to step inside. Crossing that threshold was probably the most difficult thing they had ever done in their lives. The owner of this home wasn't just any Gentile. He was part of the hated Roman army of occupation. He's an oppressor of our people. I can imagine the six Jewish fellows watching Peter intently. "Is he really going to do this?" And then their shock when Peter takes the plunge: "Whoa. He did it." Then in turn each musters the courage to cross the point of no return.

Inside they find Cornelius and his family together with several household servants and some of the soldiers of his company. They've all been waiting eagerly. To Peter's utter astonishment, Cornelius explains how an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter who would proclaim a message of salvation to him and his household. "We're listening. Tell us what you have to say."

Peter begins to speak – doing something he never imagined. He explains the human predicament, how all have sinned and are rightly under God's wrath and curse. There's no way for us to save ourselves. But there's Good News. In love and mercy God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Savior. He took the wrath and curse of God on himself, dying a shameful death on a (ahem) Roman cross. Three days later he rose again from the dead. Now all who believe in him have the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

When he gets to the part about Jesus rising from the dead, Peter is likely expecting to be laughed out of the house. These guys know what a crucifixion is. They've done them. And they know that those who are crucified, dead, and buried don't come back to life. But instead of outbursts of guffaws, Peter sees that his hearers are in rapt attention. And when he comes to the conclusion of his message, a most amazing thing happens. The Holy Spirit comes upon these Gentiles in a visible way just like he did to Peter and the other Apostles on the day of Pentecost. And while this was good for Cornelius and his household, the visible manifestation of the Spirit was primarily for the benefit of Peter and the Jews with him. It's not until that moment Peter finally figures out what the vision of the sheet and animals was all about. It's not just that God is declaring formerly forbidden foods to be clean, through the Gospel message he's making the Gentiles clean.

Cornelius and his household were baptized on the spot. Peter and his companions stayed with them several days, explaining in more detail the mission and ministry of Jesus. And yes, overcoming their worst fears they ate Gentile food off of Gentile plates. I suspect that they enjoyed it too.

At his hearing before the assembled Church at Jerusalem, Peter recounted the whole story of what had happened. As we heard, the believers there were just as astonished as Peter was when he experienced it all himself. The six witnesses testified that everything Peter said was true. And those who had brought the charges against him had nothing more to say. They joined the others in praising God and marveling that to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

And that only makes sense when you look at it from the Lord's perspective. When you consider the vast gulf that exists between his perfect righteousness and the wretched sinfulness of even the noblest human, then the differences between one sinner and the next seem pretty small indeed. And that's the way we need to think about it. While it's true that in the Church we've eliminated the distinction between Jew and Gentile, we still have our prejudices. There are those we think of as if we were Jews and they were Gentiles. Maybe it's because of their low social status or relative lack of affluence. Maybe their habits of hygiene don't meet our standards. Maybe it's because everybody knows what kind of dissolute and immoral lives they've been leading. Whatever the cause, we treat them as if the message of the Gospel is not for them. Who are your Gentiles? The Lord wants them to be saved also. Do you?

But let's take it a step farther. How's that going to happen? It's interesting that an angel came to Cornelius, but didn't preach the Gospel to him. I mean, if all the Lord had wanted to do was to make converts of Cornelius and his people, the angel could have told them about Jesus. Why didn't he do that? The answer is because the Lord doesn't want independent converts floating around all on their own. No, he makes converts and unites them to his Church, the one body of Christ. It's in the Church that believers are spiritually fed and sustained. It's in the Church that believers enjoy fellowship, and support and care for each other. Therefore it's always through the ministry of the Church and its members that the Lord makes converts. In other words, it's up to us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to those who as yet do not believe. May the Lord give us all the opportunities and boldness to do so – especially to those whom we have in the past sinfully regarded as Gentiles.

In closing, I'd like to mention some encouraging reports I've read lately which demonstrate that the Lord is still at work through his Church making converts of those we might hold to be unlikely candidates. As you know, vast numbers of Muslims have been fleeing the war torn and impoverished areas of western Asia. This has been cause for concern for many in Europe and here in the US, for there's fear that radical Islamic terrorists may be hiding themselves among the refugees. And that is a danger. What's not so widely reported, however, is that many of these refugees are converting to Christianity. Indeed, some are already Christian, having heard the Gospel through radio and internet ministries, but they've been unable to practice their faith openly because leaving Islam in their native countries is a crime punishable by death. My point is that this refugee crisis which is seen by so many as cause for fear and alarm is being used by God to bring people we might count as Gentiles to the saving knowledge of the truth. This is God's will for all people. May he make it our will also, that we may overcome our fears and speak the Good News of Jesus to all who need to hear. And all glory be to God for those who come to saving faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!