

Acts of the Holy Spirit - 13
Breaking Boundaries and Rules with Jesus
Acts 10, Week of Oct 8, 2017
Bay Park Life Groups – Leader

A bit of background is needed to truly appreciate why the story of Peter (a Jesus believing Jew) and Cornelius (a pagan Roman Centurion) takes up so much ink in Acts. To this day, orthodox Jews continue to observe only Old Testament purity laws as well as a host of additional purity rules that have been added since. Purity laws are all about distinguishing between what is proper versus improper; in it's place versus out of place. *Rich soil in a farm field is considered clean until it has been transferred to the kitchen floor – where it is dirt. In Israel, purity and impurity, clean and unclean, holy and profane were all determined by whether things, persons, and places were “in place” or “out of place.”*¹ At this point you're probably wondering, why? As a fallen, broken, rebellion bent human race, purity laws function as a code of how to approach a perfect and holy God – what is proper and what is out of place?

The Good News of the Gospel is that relationship with God is not based on what we do (purity by separation) but on “Jesus in my place” (purity by imputation – Christ's righteousness covers us by grace through faith). The story of Peter and Cornelius is a timeless reminder that in our brokenness, the temptation is always to revert back to salvation by our good rules and works versus salvation by God's great grace. May God's scandalous grace do a great work in us as we dig into his word together.

1. When the Church was born, it was initially made up of Jesus believing Jews. Though Gentiles coming to faith was not a total shock, the miracle of God bringing all nations together in one family (aka the church) was. Fill in the sentence: It would take a real miracle for ___ to become part of the family of God today.

The first Jewish Christians would have remembered Jesus and the Samaritan women (John 4:1-32), the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10), his commissioning to go to “all Nations” (Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 1:8), and more. What they didn't see coming was the tearing down of religious and practical walls of separation such as eating the same food together.

Read Acts 10:1-8

2. One of the most common perceptions among Canadians today is that there is a “god” and that he/she/it accepts and blesses us based on how good we are. Luke carefully underlines the fact that if anybody deserved the title “good” it was Cornelius. What then do we learn about God and good people?

¹ Nguyen vanThanh, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XL, no. 4 Oct 2012, pp 458-459

A proselyte was a Gentile who undertook to keep the Jewish law in its entirety and was admitted into full fellowship with the people of Israel by a three-fold rite: (1) circumcision for male proselytes, (2) a purificatory self-baptism in the presence of witnesses, and (3) the offering of a sacrifice... Many Gentiles in those days, while not prepared to enter the Jewish community as full proselytes, were attracted by the simple monotheism of Jewish... worship and by the ethical standards of the Jewish way of life.²

As a God-fearer and not full proselyte we learn that:

- God hears our earnest prayers whether our theology is correct or not. Cornelius lived up to the light he had and God honoured that.
- You don't have to be a Christian to be good, have high moral standards and a generous and compassionate heart. Every human being is created in God's image and can choose to pursue or reject our God-informed intuitions.
- Being good doesn't save anyone. As good as the Centurion was, he was still a sinner in need of a Saviour – Jesus in my place.

Read 10:9-35

3. What is the meaning of the vision Peter had and what principles and application can we draw?

- God is saying in the vision: "even those things that are defiled and unfit for my presence I can make clean and fit for my presence. There is no being that I cannot make clean." The key word is "make". Peter had assumed that some things just were inherently clean and other things just inherently unclean. God is introducing a new concept — that salvation is not a matter of pedigree or even of achievement, but is the result of the action of God. So nothing is inherently and permanently unclean. The Gentiles, who were ceremonially unclean, were like the unclean animals in the sheet, mixed in with the "clean" animals, who represented the Jews. When God cleanses someone from sin, then they are equal with anyone else and should all be in association together. "Now I realize... God does not show favoritism" (10:34) means "now I see that external criteria such as appearance, race, nationality, class, gender make not a whit of difference for whether I am loved and justified by God". (Peter, obviously, knows this at one level — it's the gospel! But at another level he had not applied it to his habitual attitude toward Gentiles.) The religion of good works will definitely give some people the right to feel superior to others. But the gospel of grace means that no saved person can feel superior to any other saved person — because we are all saved by grace alone.³
- Biblical holiness is about what God has done for us in Jesus, not what we do for God. Too often Christians view holiness as separation from sin and by extension, sinful people. In our sanctification (joining Jesus' life, community and mission) we should be becoming more aware of personal sin and sinning less, but that

² F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p.64, 216

³ Timothy Keller, *Evangelism: Studies in the book of Acts*, (Redeemer Church, 2005), p 91

never precludes us from hanging around sinners, as if their very presence makes us impure. Our holiness is Christ's righteousness, not our segregation.

- Though Peter might have longed to taste bacon, the vision wasn't ultimately about food, but our relationship and willingness to engage with people. God could have set up a meeting between Cornelius and Peter in a neutral, foodless, venue. Mission accomplished? No! The kind of acceptance God calls us to extend to others is to mirror the acceptance we have received in Christ. When our righteousness and religion keeps us from seekers and sinners, then we've become the very Pharisees Jesus came to rescue creation from.
- Proximity is not only key to Gospel proclamation, but also to joining Jesus' community. We don't love at a distance, but up close.
- This passage has huge implications in something as simple as who and how we greet newcomers on a Sunday morning or at a weekday activity.

Read 10:36-48

4. Respecting others that don't look or live like us is a widely held value these days. Is the biblical call to Gospel inclusivity the same as the inclusivity Canadians desire and value? In what way are the foundations and outcomes the same or different?
 - Try to get people to come to terms with the differences and similarities between the societal value of inclusivity versus inclusivity that is based on the Gospel. Much of the "inclusivity" we talk about today is based on relativism – the belief that there is not one objective and universal truth. We need to include others because they have a right to their own personal truth, so the logic goes. Whereas, biblical inclusivity is based on the exclusive belief that there is one God and Jesus is the only way to right relationship with God. Every individual is a unique creation of God. God desires for all to be a part of his global Church, and He play no favourites. This is a very different basis for inclusivity. For more reading and an excellent treatment of the topic see Derek Rishmawy's article, "How to Really Be Inclusive Life Jesus".
5. *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right (10:34). Are we doing enough to be diverse as church?*

Visible Minority Status – Census 2001 for Kingston

Chinese 24%; South Asian 23%; Black 13%; Filipino 7%; Latin American 9%; Southeast Asian 5%; Arab 4%; West Asian 4%; Korean 5%; Japanese 2%; Visible minorities not in example 4%.

The early Jewish Christians had to radically change their traditions in order to make room for Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:11-22). When God converts new people and new kinds of people to himself, the church must also convert in some ways to make room.

*The orientation of the church is always forward, into new growth and adaptation and not a backward focus, trying to steward the way things were.*⁴

6. What trends, traditions, prejudices or preferences work against the radical unity and diversity God so wants for the church today? Where have you grown personally? Still struggle? Like Peter, how is God challenging you and to what end?

⁴ Bruxy Cavey, *Plot Twist: When God Surprises His People*, The Meeting House, Jan 24, 2010