

April 23rd: Unclean

Good morning again, friends! I hope you all had a wonderful time with Pastor Maggie last week as she shared more about the Great Commission and the calling to be disciples who make disciples in our world, I know you were in good hands! This morning we continue our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. Along the way, we've read about nomadic people, people under empire, and now we turn to a new stage of our text which is focused on the birth of a new group of people: the very first Christians.

We've finished our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and so the next step in our journey is to examine what happens to Jesus' movement and disciples after his resurrection. For these next few weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at the early church—including the writings of the Book of Acts, and the letter to the Romans. These texts require us to carefully consider the context of these writings, so our meditations will have a little bit of everything: history, theology, and application to our own lives.

Before we dig in, would you pray with me?

Renewing God,

You sent your son Jesus to us to set us free from the brokenness of our world, but sometimes we still get caught up in old ways of thinking. You have liberated us from our shame and past circumstances, but we still hold on to categories and distinctions that we created to belittle or dismiss one another. We long for peace and unity, but we still find ourselves clinging to laws and rules that keep us separated and disembodied. Bring fresh wisdom to us this morning, renew our vision, and remind us of our wholeness in you and the harmony we find in the love you have shared with us. Amen.

Today we turn to the Book of Acts, which tells the complicated story of the early church and the very first people to ever be called "Christians." It was a

confusing time—Jesus had risen from the dead, and now his movement was growing and expanding all over Israel. The original disciples are finding that carrying on Jesus’ message comes with some conflict—there are all kinds of disagreements about what to believe, how to act, and who is invited to be a part of this new community. It must have been a frustrating and disorienting time for everyone as they grappled with the reality of the resurrection and tried to continue the work of the gospel in an environment that was still operating under the threats of empire and hostile religious institutions. So I think we should approach these texts with compassion for our ancient brothers and sisters and their difficult circumstances.

In this passage, we hear about a curious situation involving Peter and a Gentile man named Cornelius. And not only is Cornelius not a Jew, he is also identified as being a centurion in the Italian Regiment, which means that he is a soldier in the army of the Roman empire. Despite this occupation, our biblical author describes Cornelius and his family as “God-fearing,” and a man who regularly was generous with the less fortunate. Within just a few verses, we hear that these two men both receive visions from God—visions that bring them together into an unlikely partnership.

Cornelius’ vision directs him towards the city of Joppa, now known as the coastal city of Jaffa near Tel Aviv, where Peter is staying at the house of Simon the tanner. He is instructed to send men there to collect Peter, but we don’t get much more information beyond that. In contrast, Peter’s vision is less like simple instructions and more like a riddle that he has to figure out. While Peter is in Joppa, he decides to go up to the roof of the house to pray.

Verse 10 tells us that while he was praying, “He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.”

This sounds pretty relatable, I’m sure some of us can remember a time when our low blood sugar made us get a little woozy!

Our biblical author continues, “He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.”

Many of us might be confused by this vision, and for good reason.

Ancient Jews took being a part of God’s family very seriously, and they set up specific boundaries for themselves in order to know who was in and who was out. In order to preserve their community and its unique relationship to the divine, they codified these boundaries into Old Testament laws that distinguished those who were part of God’s chosen people from those who were outside of this covenant. These food laws were an essential part of what the Jewish people set apart, and the regulations surrounding what is “kashrut,” or Kosher are notoriously complex. It wasn’t just about what animals were “clean” and which animals were “unclean,” these rules had to do with the source of the animal, its preparation, and the practice of eating together with others. Eating the incorrect foods or eating correct foods in mixed company was a recipe for ostracisation.

So you might be able to understand why Peter is also confused by these words from God—they go against everything he has ever been taught and everything he holds dear. Why would God ask him to do something that is so antithetical to his religious beliefs? Why would God repeatedly tell him to eat something that would mark him as a social outcast? Why would God give him this vision if it would only cause Peter conflict and hostility amongst his people?

Our passage for this morning ends in verse 17 with this statement: “While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate.” This may feel like an unsatisfactory ending—but the story isn’t over. While Peter is

trying to figure out his vision, Cornelius' vision has been partially completed—Peter, the man he has been searching for, has been found and will now be brought to Cornelius. And the two of them, one man a Jew and another a Gentile, will bring their visions together into one larger plan with a bold purpose. We might be tempted to skip over this small detail, but I think that would be a mistake because I think this verse tells us something important about how God communicates with his beloved creation.

I think this seemingly random verse speaks to the fact that God's vision for humanity isn't developed in a vacuum or by just one person. God's vision for humanity is discovered and discerned when people come together and partner with each other for something greater. It takes people with differing ideas and differing backgrounds, bringing together smaller pieces of the puzzle, so that the full story can be understood. No one has been given the whole vision, it takes collaboration to see the larger picture.

I like to believe that this story reminds us that we can't do God's work alone. We can't do God's work with just people who look like us and think like us. We can't do God's work with just our limited perspective. We were never intended to pursue God's plan by ourselves.

Let's hold that thought for a minute and go back to Peter's vision and take a closer look at what God said. In particular, I want us to focus on one specific sentence. Verse 15 records that Peter heard God's voice repeatedly say, "Do not call anything unclean that God has made clean."

On one hand, it is possible that God is talking about which animals are safe to eat. It is possible that God is coming to Peter with a vision about revising the food laws and relaxing the restrictions surrounding these ancient boundaries.

But on the other hand, I think we need to understand that revisiting these food laws is a way to reexamine something much larger and something even more controversial. Scholars agree, and many have written that in this case, God uses the example of kosher rituals to talk about the inclusion of Gentiles in

Jesus' movement and mission. And the idea of involving Gentiles in the gospel is a BIG deal.

In this vision and in this story, we start to see that the idea of God's family is being redefined and those historic segregations are being rewritten. No longer is it the food laws that define those who belong to God's tribe, but a sense of allegiance to Jesus. No longer is it compliance with ritual purity that decides whether someone is in or out. No longer is belonging determined by obedience to specific cultural practices. All that matters is a willingness to be a disciple of the Messiah.

Together, Peter and Cornelius begin to understand that in this Jesus movement there is no longer anyone "clean" or "unclean."

If the language of Peter's vision is difficult for us to apply to our own context, let me try to rephrase it in a way that we can understand. Reading between the lines of God's repeated instruction, I think we can also hear these similar sentiments that could make more sense to our modern ears:

Do not call anyone unwanted that God has called wanted.

Do not call anyone unworthy that God has called worthy.

Do not call anyone unfit that God has called fit.

Do not call anyone undeserving that God has called deserving.

Do not call anyone unlovable that God has called loved.

Do not call anyone unreachable that God has called his followers to reach.

Do not exclude anyone that God has decided to include.

I think these are important statements for modern disciples of Jesus to consider as we devote ourselves to being God's family.

This might not be a very popular thing for me to say, but I often feel like in modern churches, our vision and our mission are just too small. I often feel like churches, because of their insular nature, are operating out of a limited perspective. And before you get out your pitchforks, let me explain.

I think a lot of churches right now, perhaps our church included, like to play it safe when it comes to our plans for the future. Instead of dreaming big, the budget is created to be as minimal as possible, so that resources can be accumulated rather than invested in the community. In a post-COVID world, a lot of churches are singularly concerned about survival, rather than working towards growth. These churches are so consumed with maintaining their own systems and programs, that they fail to see how the Holy Spirit might be calling them into something new.

Instead of focusing on outreach, they focus on keeping current members happy. New people, if there are any, are asked to conform to the current values and desires of the congregation, rather than adding their own experiences and leadership. A lot of churches have a habit of remaining in their little church bubble, with people who think like them and act like them and dream like them. Intentionally and unintentionally, these kinds of churches create these artificial categories and boundaries that label people as “insiders” or “outsiders,” not just with language, but with behavior and community practices.

But this isn't the way God intended things to be. God's family was never intended to be an exclusive club for just a few—but an ever expanding community for all.

I will say that it is certainly not easy to be the bearer of an expansive vision. Massive change always brings up fear and anxiety. A shift like this always causes tension and hostility and uncomfortable feelings. It means sacrifice, and even the sacrifice of things we once called holy. Collaboration with community partners isn't always free from conflict.

But I think God is trying to communicate to us that the growing pains are worth it.

So we might want to ask ourselves: are we willing to be like Peter and Cornelius and risk conflict and confusion for the sake of God's big and bold

vision? Are we willing to live into discomfort and disorientation for the sake of creating a more inclusive and loving community? Are we willing to listen for the voice of God and follow the movement of the Holy Spirit, even if it leads us into the unknown?

I really hope so, because there is so much beauty to be found in this expansive vision. There is so much joy to be found in giving and receiving hospitality to people that we would otherwise distance ourselves from. There is so much divine presence in laboring together for a better world.

Here's the good news: when we no longer have to worry about who is "clean" and who is "unclean," we can use all of our energy to get our hands dirty.

Amen.