

## “ . . . Even on the Gentiles . . . ”

Salado UMC—6 May 2018: 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Preaching Text: Acts 10:44-48—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

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“Beware of no man more than yourself; we carry our worst enemies within us”

—G. K. Chesterton (1874 - 1936)

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Jesus had a way of getting right to the heart of matters. Once, when preaching to a great crowd, Jesus said, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Luke 6:41-42).

Jesus really knew how to tell it like it is. Even the slowest among us knows that finding fault with our neighbor’s foibles is child’s play compared to taking a long hard look at our own short-comings. Our biblical text this morning is a bridge text between the story of the so-called conversion of Cornelius and the aftershock in the Jewish-Christian community of faith. Perhaps the Acts 10 story is not so much the Cornelius’ conversion, but rather of Peter. Cornelius and Peter each receive simultaneous visions from God. Each vision prepares them for the resulting encounter with the other. They need the preparation because they come from two different worlds—one Gentile, one Jewish. After their encounter with the Holy Spirit and each other, Peter and Cornelius become Christian brothers, although Jewish law forbade them to have connection. A thorough reading of Acts 10 describes the wonder of the Holy Spirit getting these two—Peter and Cornelius—together. Hear today’s lesson which follows the double vision:

**While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. [45] The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, [46] for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, [47] “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” [48] So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days (Acts 10:44-48).**

When Cornelius’ household invites Peter to “stay for several days,” it implies that Peter ate with the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household. In other words, Peter accepts hospitality with an antagonist of Israel. Here is where Peter’s difficulties began. He had violated a strict Jewish law of having table fellowship with Gentiles. So, the Acts story continues in chapter 11 attending the clash between Peter and Jewish-Christian leaders in Judea. As Luke tells the story:

**Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:1-3).**

The religious authorities call Peter’s relationship with Cornelius into question not over the religious issue of baptism, as we might have expected. Rather, Peter’s social relationship depicted in his eating with Gentiles is at the heart of the Judaizer’s quarrel with Peter. Peter tells them that God spoke to him

and said: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 11:9). Gerhard Krodel puts the matter:

**Luke interpreted Peter’s vision to mean we “should not call any *person* common or unclean.” God himself had declared pagans clean and had broken down the barrier between them. This, however, meant that Peter must associate and eat with them. No one has the right to preach the gospel to anyone with whom he or she is not willing to associate. The details of how table-fellowship between Jew and Gentile was to be regulated Luke leaves to the Apostles’ Conference, but here, by means of the vision and Peter’s subsequent stay with the Gentiles, he sets forth the principle that the unity in the common faith under the one Lord does not tolerate segregation. God led Peter to the realization that Gentiles have equal status in the church and before God as Gentiles and this demands fellowship.<sup>1</sup>**

Unfortunately, this is a lesson we need to learn over and over. This is also why we do not interpret the Bible, so much as the Bible interprets us. I once had the honor of officiating a wedding with a Rabbi at the Yale University Chapel. The groom had been my roommate at SMU and was a Rhodes Scholar. His bride was a recent graduate of Yale Law School. She finished second in her class. This was a highly sophisticated and well-educated group of folks of which I was privileged to be a part. Sadly, some in the wedding party hadn’t the manners that kept pace with their education.

At the reception banquet I sat between two bridesmaids, obviously amused by sitting next to a Texas and country Methodist preacher. Eventually the conversation took an abrupt bad turn for me as I became the brunt of their social criticism of religion in general, and the South, in particular. One of them, in her naughty haughtiness, remarked to me, but really for her friend’s benefit on my right, “Yes, Preacher, we know about the South. That is where they treat black people so badly and lord their race over them.”

I paused for a moment as I looked out on a sea of white faces in the banquet room, complete with a brigade of young black men, serving the elite in white gloves, and said calmly, “Yes, ma’am I suppose that is why I feel so comfortable with the situation here this afternoon.”

Kahlil Gibran once remarked: “The real test of good manners is to be able to put up with bad manners pleasantly.” All of us have people in our lives that seem beyond the reach of God’s good grace. For Peter and others in the first century Jewish-Christian church, their view was that the Gentiles were unclean. For those in the South, perhaps, it has always been those persons of color. But I learned that day in New Haven, even people who ought to know better could learn a thing or two about God’s grace. God extends it to those persons we often look down upon. In Acts 10 we find Peter converted to a vision that God’s realm is large enough to include all. Thanks be to God!!! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Krodel, Gerhard, *Acts: Proclamation Commentaries, The New Testament Witnesses for Preaching*, Fortress Press, 1981, pp. 44-45.