

“Abundance”

Acts 10:1-38

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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Today’s scripture reading is a pivotal one in the life of the early church. It deals with the sacred and the profane. It has to do with whether Greeks and Jews could coexist. It has to do with sacred kosher laws. But mostly it has to do with race.

When I chose this scripture reading a few months ago, I was fixin’ to talk about abundance and scarcity. It is after all our commitment Sunday.

Last week we spoke about Reparations. This seems so hard to think about, especially if you approach life from the perspective of scarcity. But what if we had a theology of abundance? A theology that says we have more than enough love, compassion, mercy, resources and imagination. How would we re-orient ourselves? Hold that thought.

But then I reread the scripture in light of our present reality and I realized it really spoke much more about race. I’m very thankful for Clarence Jordan’s translation of the scripture for it lays bare what is often lost in Jew/Greek discussions. So indulge me in unpacking this pivotal story and see if it doesn’t point us in a better and even more abundant direction.

Today’s scripture reading is ostensibly about a change of diet which lead to a change in heart, which lead to the vision of the very reign of God on earth. But diet is all wrapped up with religion. And it’s code for racial and community purity.

In Biblical times, diet was a very important thing. There were good foods and bad foods, clean foods and unclean foods, meats that were ritually prepared and other meats that were sacrificed to idols. Eating the wrong kinds of meat was a real no no. It meant that you were unclean, just as the food of which you partook was unclean. And only clean people were full members of the community. It’s not a huge leap to the thought that others who did not have your heritage, your rituals, your biases were to be looked down upon. It was the one thing you could cling to when everything else was falling apart.

Peter had lived his life as a good Jew, meaning that he kept the kosher laws, but it also meant that he kept the laws that restricted one’s interactions with the Gentiles, the Goyim, the nations, all the people who weren’t Jewish.

The 10th chapter of Acts opens with just such a Gentile, a Centurion named Cornelius having a vision from God. Cornelius was not your typical Roman soldier. Acts 10:2 says that Cornelius feared God as did his whole household, he gave alms liberally to the poor, and prayed constantly to God. When you fear God, pray constantly and give alms, chances are that you will be more attentive to God, and you may hear God's voice more clearly.

Well, God did speak to Cornelius, but not late at night in a dream. No, God chose to send an angel to speak to Cornelius at the ninth hour of the day. That's 3:00 in the afternoon in plain daylight, probably while Cornelius was at work. The angel said to him, "Cornelius...your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial to God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter." So Cornelius sent about three men the 30 miles to Joppa in order to find Peter.

Meanwhile back in Joppa, God was at work with Peter. There he was up on the roof praying in the noonday sun. But while he was praying he started to get hungry. He probably smelled the food cooking in the streets of Joppa below him.

Peter tried to go back to his praying and get the food out of his mind, but God would have none of that. In a vision, Peter saw the heavens open up and something descending, which looked like a big tablecloth. And on that sheet were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him that said, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter, whose mouth was watering by now, knew his kosher upbringing said, "No, Lord, I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." Peter was safe within his little box where all of the rules were clear. But God was sick of those restrictive boxes and was about to break them open. The voice from above said, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." And Peter being Peter, had to have this vision three times. Peter had a thing about the number 3. He fell asleep of Jesus three times. He denied Jesus three times. The risen Jesus had to ask Peter three times if he loved him. God was going to make sure that Peter got the point.

Enter upon the scene, the men sent by Cornelius. The Spirit said to Peter to accompany them without question or without delay. So in silence, they all set out to Caesarea, again, another 30 miles in the desert. Are you beginning to catch on to the humor in this story? When Peter arrived in Caesarea, he saw that Cornelius had gathered quite a congregation of kinfolk and close friends knowing that Peter would be visiting. Talk about pressure. And not one of them, as far as we know, was a fellow Jew. Now, we need to remember, that the Jews and especially the Christian Jews were suspect in the eyes of government authorities. Both Cornelius and Peter were taking quite a risk on behalf of their faith.

When he saw Peter, Cornelius fell down at Peter's feet and worshipped him. Clearly Cornelius had a lot to learn about Christianity. Kneeling to worship a person is like idolatry. God taught Peter something about Christianity through Cornelius, though. It was something that would change the face of Christianity, as we know it. Cornelius showed Peter that God could speak to other races, other cultures, and other lifestyles. Peter's and the Christian world's mind was expanded because of how God worked through Cornelius.

The first thing Peter said to Cornelius was, "Stand up; I too am a man." Peter the apostle saw Cornelius the Centurion, a gentile, as an equal. As they looked at each other in astonishment and wonder, Peter broke the silence: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to even visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." The two of them then exchanged stories of how the Spirit had brought them together. God told Peter that no *food* was profane. Peter now states that no *people* are profane.

Peter and Cornelius realized once and for all that whatever differences they may have had, they were both created by the same God, had similar hopes and dreams and benefited nothing from their fear and judgment of each other.

I think about racial strife and economic fears in our own state and country. I think about the xenophobic and racist response to immigration. And I think we might need to listen once again to Acts 10.

Then Peter turned to the masses of people that Cornelius had gathered and said four words that would change the course of Christianity, and open up the gospel to the Gentiles. Four words which we still have a little bit of trouble swallowing, if we are completely honest about it. "God shows no partiality." "...But in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."

God shows no partiality. That means that regardless of what popular culture would have us believe, God does not prefer one class, one race, one nationality, one gender, one sexual orientation, one party, one team, or even one church over another. God is above all of that. The question is, are we above that, too?

Do we show partiality to one group over another?

Are we willing to only set ourselves up with the best people?

Are we willing to repair the breaches out there so that streets could finally be safe to live and drive in for everyone?

Are we willing to have the mind of God when it comes to things or people we do not understand?

Are we quick to dismiss someone simply because they hold different beliefs or life experiences?

We remember Jesus' words: "judge not, lest you yourself be judged." "Judgment is mine", says God in the scriptures. Remember, God shows no partiality.

I spoke earlier about a theology of scarcity or a theology of abundance. Let's go there.

It's more than optimism vs. pessimism.

It's about recognizing the God has already given us enough wisdom, courage, and resources to accomplish our tasks.

It's just a matter of finding the right formula and living into it.

A theology of scarcity says there are certain people with whom we should not associate. There are restrictions to living a faithful life. We are to live on the straight and narrow or else we will be punished—spending an eternity in torment.

A theology of abundance says what I have created, you shall not call profane. I have come to give you life and give you life in abundance.

That means celebrating diversity.

It means recognizing beauty in another.

It means enjoying blooming flowers and emerging greenery.

It means recognizing the holiness in your neighbor, even when your neighbor drives you nuts.

It means celebrating generosity because God has been generous to us.

It means placing limits not because it will save you from hell, but because it will help your neighbor live into their abundance.

It means getting vaccinated.

The visions challenged Peter to rethink not only his diet, but his interactions. And I think it changed his heart, too.

Peter finally realizes that the kosher laws are something that he should not be so rigid about as the movement grows and changes. It is also the beginning of a move toward inclusion of former outsiders into the emerging church. It was a radical step. Peter declared that in order to be a Christian, you no longer needed to be Jewish. That means that race is no longer a stumbling block, at least in theory.

I think the diet change was easier than the heart change. Sometimes we need to practice something before it sinks in. People in recovery talk about "fake it 'til you make it." Maybe we need to find ways to practice generosity of heart even before we are ready to embrace it. We do this through giving, through volunteering, through attending to those less fortunate than ourselves.

But here's the rub. We do it not because it makes them or us feel better. We do it so we can see the face of God.

That's why we tune in to church week after week, so we can witness to and remember this change of heart so central to the Gospel. I guess eventually it can become second nature, but it takes a disciplined approach. This is especially true if we are doing something that is countercultural. Maybe that's why children start out small, so they help us parents get used to doing things differently.

My friends, Peter changed his diet when he realized he had to adopt not only a person named Cornelius. He needed to adopt a whole new culture. And it changed his heart and it changed the heart of the church toward one of inclusion, of welcome to the outsider. It broke down the barriers. It wasn't easy. I'm sure there were still people who preferred the old ways and kept rigidly to them. But by the time the New Testament closes, those rigid ones disappear. What we are left with is the inclusive community. The transforming community, the resurrected community.

A change of heart is always what God has in mind for us. A change in diet is a preliminary step. A change in heart is what it's all about.

What part of your heart is hardened today?

What part of your lifestyle needs to be altered in order to open your heart to God's radical movement toward community?

My friends, we have an abundance of imagination.

We have an abundance of courage.

We have an abundance of grace.

We have an abundance of Generosity, but also an abundance of wisdom which calls for not just charity, but mutual support and aid that is woven into the very nature of our common covenant as a country.

Because we have this abundance, we dare to recognize that we are not just sharing our wealth with another, we are recognizing that nothing is ours and everything is ours when we lean into God's audacious challenge.

We take steps to recognize the land we are on.

We take steps to imagine a better future.

We take steps to honor others as sacred.

We are all on this table cloth of abundance and God invites us to this feast.

Not just to eat our fill, but to see God in everyone else that is invited to the feast and everyone means everyone.

That's the radical abundant nature of the Gospel.

Thanks be to God.