

“Partiality”

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Acts 10: 1-8, 34-36

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the New Testament book, The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10. It's a story of a Roman soldier, a devout man, who was led to approach Simon Peter to learn about Jesus Christ. It's a story about Simon Peter, who in the course of the story learns that God doesn't favor Jewish Christians (or when we extend the lesson, American Christians).

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

The story is a long one, so we now skip ahead four days to when Peter met Cornelius in his home along with Cornelius' relatives and close friends. Cornelius explained what had happened and as our story continues:

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

Cornelius is a Gentile, a professional soldier. A common man, he has worked his way up through the ranks of the Roman army and is now responsible for maintaining order and discipline among the hundred or so soldiers under him. Centurions are usually among the front ranks in battle. From this, we can surmise that Cornelius is a leader, a man of courage.

He is stationed in Caesarea, a Roman port city along the east coast of the Mediterranean. The Acts writer describes him as a devout man, who prays and who gives generously to the poor. But again, Cornelius is a Gentile, part of the invading army that had – on orders – put Jesus to death.

Simon Peter is a faithful Jew. A fisherman by trade, he took to the itinerant life, following a rebel teacher and rabbi, training under him. Having gone through his own trial of fire, he too is a man of courage, a hard worker, and the named leader among this new Jewish sect that follows Christ.

As a faithful Jew, Peter knows that it is unlawful for him to associate with or visit a Gentile. Unlawful according to God's Law. Peter has been an observant Jew his entire life, as we find in the verses between the bookends that [name] read a moment ago.

Peter is staying in Joppa, also on the Sea about thirty-nine miles south of Caesarea. It is nearly lunchtime and Peter is hungry. He goes up on the roof to catch the breeze off the water while he prays. And as he prays, he has a vision.

“He saw heaven opened up and something like a large linen sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. Inside the sheet were all kinds of four-legged animals, reptiles, and wild birds. A voice told him, “Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!”

Peter exclaimed, “Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke again, saying, “Never consider unclean what God has made pure.” This happened three times, then the object was suddenly pulled back into heaven.

Peter was bewildered about what the vision meant” (10:9b-17a).

Peter has never eaten a rabbit or frog legs. Never tasted a pork chop or ham. Or the crayfish, crabs or clams that might come up in his nets. Like a good Jewish child, he never munched on ants or locusts, just to find out what they were like.

His family practiced *kashrut*, eating only what was proper and correct according to Torah, only foods that were *kosher*. Anything not *kosher* is *treif*, which literally means torn.

Kosher is not a style of cooking. Any kind of food – Chinese, Mexican, Indian, fusion, etc. – can be *kosher* if it is prepared in accordance with Jewish law. In the same way, traditional Jewish foods like knishes, bagels, blintzes and matzah ball soup can each be *treif* if they are not prepared in accordance with Jewish law.

You can read all about the Bible’s dietary laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. For now, we’ll say that certain mammals, birds and fish are excluded, as well as insects, reptiles and amphibians.

People are to avoid eating meat and dairy in the same meal, and for some hours afterward. No butter burgers! No clam chowder. No pepperoni, or even Canadian bacon, pizza. Like many ancient peoples, early Israelites believed that an animal's blood carried the soul, so that is not to be consumed either.

Why do Jewish people do this, even today? There may be some health benefits,. No trichinosis if you don’t eat pork. Though the evidence is slim, eating meat and dairy together may interfere with digestion. Still, rabbit meat is no less healthy than goat meat or beef.

A better, and shorter, answer is that Jewish people eat this way because the Torah says so. Early Israelites, long before Jesus time, sought to distinguish themselves from the people around them, people who worshiped multiple gods and for whom pork was a dietary mainstay. Dietary laws help to foster a sense of identity. They are distinctive and set apart the practitioners.

Looking deeper though, Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin suggests that *kashrut* laws are “designed as a call to holiness.

The ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, pure and defiled, the sacred and the profane, is very important in Judaism. Imposing rules on what you can and cannot eat ingrains that kind of self-control. In addition, it elevates the simple act of eating into a religious ritual.”¹

We can understand this. How often have you shared a meal at church – not just a Holy Week *Seder* but any potluck or even snacks and drinks after worship, and felt like you were a part of a holy moment?

The capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, the sacred and the profane is very important to Christians as well as Jews. We too are called to holiness. Through the centuries, the Church has established practices whereby we might grow closer to God. We pray, we fast at times, we worship together. We work for justice, write letters, speak up for the disenfranchised. We visit the homebound and the imprisoned. We organize Downtown Memory Cafes, PNCs, soup kitchens and voter registrations. We train up our youngsters to know of God's love for them and God's hope for their lives. We gather for conversation, study, music, meals, anything that builds community. And we invite other people to join us. In all these ways, we heed God's call to holiness.

Saying someone's faithful means little unless they work to grow in holiness. We get this.

Peter is a faithful person. All his life he has observed the practices that he trusts will help him to live as God would have him live. This includes what he eats, what he wears and who he associate with. And Jews don't associate with non-Jews like Cornelius.

Many of us have heard this story of Cornelius and Peter. As Christians, we hear it as a simple allegory. We are told that the "unclean" animals represent the "unclean" persons like Cornelius. And that the voice from heaven is God, telling Peter to give up his foolishness about what's clean or unclean. We can find good in this telling.

Yet, if we try to hear this as a Jewish audience would have heard it, we find a very different story. The voice in Peter's vision tempts him to abandon what he knows that God has commanded. Peter refuses, faithful but clearly confused. Afterward, it is as a "*faithful Jew*, tested and proven to be law-observant, [that Peter] recognizes that it is 'kosher' for faithful Gentiles to be welcomed into the church."ⁱⁱ

Now, the idea that Peter is tested by God does not resonate with me but I can accept that God might work through what appears to be a testing of faith, one that helps a faithful person to grow in his understanding of God's vision.

And this perspective gives us food for thought. Here we find God leading one faithful person to recognize that it's faithfulness that makes one person or another approachable, acceptable.

Notice that in Peter's vision, the hawk is not changed into a chicken, or the camel into a sheep. Cornelius is still a Roman Gentile; still not Jewish. And Peter doesn't know that in a couple days, God as Spirit is going to blow through Cornelius' house and everyone's going to get baptized.

What Peter knows, what he accepts, is that God's intention includes even people who are part of the Roman occupying forces that are oppressing the Jewish people. No strings attached. And if God is including them, God will include anybody.

God shows no partiality.

So the next time you harbor less-than-gracious thoughts about your Hmong neighbors, or about the Muslims who live in so much fear that they do not put signs on their mosques, or the young-man-of-color who has different ideas than you about how to spend an evening, or the trans man or the lesbian couple – all of them God's beloved children – pray, right then and afterward,

Dear God, I see differences and though they don't matter to you, I still think they matter. But I'm willing to change. Help me to see each person as a treasure, a vital part of our

community and of your creation. Help me to see the good in each of us and never to assume that I'm better than another. Amen.

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- ⁱ Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be A Jew: A Guide To Jewish Observance In Contemporary Life*, in “Jewish Dietary Laws (Kashrut)” in Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of AICE, as found at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/overview-of-jewish-dietary-laws-and-regulations> (last viewed on January 4, 2020).
- ⁱⁱ Neil Elliott, “Acts 10:9-17,” in *The People’s Bible: New Revised Standard Version with The Apocrypha*, Fortress Press, 2009, 1549.