

SERIES: “Outspoken Heroes of the Faith”

Peter – Acts 10:1-8; 11:1-18

For some reason, it has always more natural for us to talk about “them” and “us” than it is for us to talk about “we.” We see differences rather than likenesses between us and others, and we stress the differences rather than the likenesses. We also group ourselves by specific likenesses.

When we were growing up, most of our parents would set limits on the people with whom we could associate or not. They didn’t want us to become friends with children from different economic levels, cultural backgrounds, belief structures. Some of this was good parenting, while it might also simply have been prejudice.

In school we quickly learned who was a part of the in group, and who was out. These social norms carried through college and into the work place and beyond.

Certainly the apostle Peter was brought up with the idea of “them” and “us.” He was a Jew, a child of God. All Jews knew that God loved them best. They were God’s chosen people. As God’s chosen people, they were to keep themselves separate from others. To interact with gentiles, or non-Jews, made you ritually unclean and you would need to go through a cleansing process before you could worship God.

The Jewish dietary laws exemplified the distinction that Jews saw between themselves and others. What they ate and didn’t eat identified them as Jews. It enabled them to keep separate and to keep their identity. The dietary laws were a way that Jews believed they pleased God. It all changed with two dreams. It is difficult to change—especially when what is being changed has been ingrained in you since childhood.

Today we also meet Cornelius. He was a Roman Centurion. If ever there was a super society, or at least a society who believed that they were above everyone else, it was the Romans. Even though Cornelius was a devout, Godfearer, he would still find it unsettling to seek help from an unknown, common Jew. The fact that he was a leader in the Roman army—a professional soldier—only added to his sense of superiority and denial of need.

Jews hated the Romans not only because the Romans were heathens, but also because they were an occupying force in their land. Peter would not willingly have associated with a Roman. Peter’s prejudice against the Romans was probably reinforced by the fact that they were the ones who had crucified Jesus.

Cornelius had a dream that directed him to go against his culture and upbringing and seek the aid of a Jew. Peter had a dream in which God declared all things clean, and God did this three times. Though it was difficult for both Cornelius and Peter, they followed the directions of the dream.

It is not easy to change, but we must change if we are going to be obedient to the will of God. God calls his followers not to see the differences but rather the likenesses. God calls his followers to emphasize the “we” and not the “us” and “they.”

Think about it - Jesus’ ministry broke down the barriers we have between us. He was constantly going against cultural norms and religious traditions and reaching out to the excluded, neglected and forgotten. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ broke down the barriers between God and humankind and between people. As the Messiah, Jesus did not die to make Israel great, rather he died for all people to give them a new relationship with God through Him.

This whole situation turned the Apostle Peter's life upside down. Peter couldn't believe what he was seeing. He was in the house of a Gentile, and God was converting Gentiles and blessing Gentiles just like God had done for the Jews. This goes against everything Peter had been brought up to believe. Peter had always thought that God was an exclusive God, for the Jews only, that Gentiles were the outsiders, the second-class citizens of the world who didn't deserve God's attention like the Jews did.

But now, Peter sees that God loves the Gentiles just like the Jews. Now Peter sees with his own eyes that God loves all people, regardless of what nationality they are. He wants all people to believe and be saved. Now Peter sees that God is a God for every person on the face of the earth, and not just for a select few. This blew Peter away – changed the way he had thought.

Can you relate to Peter? Sometimes we forget that no matter what a person's nationality, no matter what a person's social or economic situation, God wants every person on the face of this earth to believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. Sometimes it's hard to fully accept, that God loves me, but he also loves the dark-skinned child in Afghanistan just as much. God loves me, but he loves that homeless person who's mumbling and begging on the street – God loves him just as much. God loves me, but he loves that person who has made too many mistakes in life and is now sitting in jail – God loves that person just as much. God is a God who loves all people, and wants all people no matter who they are, to believe in Jesus and be saved. He does not show favoritism, as the Apostle Peter reminds us today. What an amazing and loving God we have!

God changes the way we think – that's what happens when you spend time in his Word. And really, that's the purpose of our church. The purpose of our church is to get people in touch with this wonderful message, so that God can change people for the better. There are so many people out there just like Cornelius, nice people who don't know the way of salvation. There are so many people out there like Peter, people who don't know just how loving our God really is. As a church, we are here to share with people these wonderful truths from God's Word, so that God can change people for the better.

People use circles to include some and exclude others. The cross of Christ expanded the circles to include everyone. Jesus died for everyone, and everyone is included in his invitation to become his followers and disciples. As difficult as it is for us, Jesus calls us to erase the lines that we have drawn that include and exclude. We are challenged to see our likenesses and not our differences. We are all sinners in need of a savior. We are all people who are created and loved by God. This is a difficult story to read, because it invites us to ask ourselves how we exclude others. It also challenges us to be obedient servants of God and break down the barriers that we have erected.

There's the story that when Jesus ascended into heaven after his mission on earth, the angels asked him, "Did you accomplish your task?" "Yes, all is finished," the Lord replied. "We have a second question," said the angels. "Has the whole world heard of you?" "No," said Jesus. The angels next asked, "Then what is your plan?" Jesus said, "I have left 12 men and some other followers to carry the message to the whole world." "The angels looked at each other, and then at him and said, "What is your Plan B?"

Friends, there is no plan B. God sent Peter to help that Gentile, that Roman soldier learn the true way to heaven. Today, he is sending us to every person on the face of this earth, no matter who they are, so that they also might find the peace that they are looking for in their lives. May God bless you, as you become a tool in the hands of God, a tool through which he blesses and changes the hearts of others. Amen.