

God Doesn't Make Junk
Acts 10:1-16
Acts 10:17-33, 44-48
June 23, 2019 – Second Sunday after Pentecost

Over the eight years that I have spent with you, with the exception of the Pentecost Story in Acts 2, I could probably count on one hand the number of times I have preached on the Book of Acts; and I would have fingers left over. But on this, my second to last sermon from this pulpit, I feel called to preach on the tenth chapter of Acts. Yes, this is one of my favorite scriptures in the entire book; and yes, it is hugely important to our lives today.

Here we have Peter. . . Peter whom we could probably call “the number one disciple” of Jesus. You might remember, in the Gospel of Matthew, it was Peter on whom Jesus said he would build his church. It was Peter whom Jesus said he would give the keys to heaven. So Peter is hungry. He falls asleep, and he begins to dream about food. But this is no ordinary dream. Peter sees a large sheet coming down from heaven filled with all kinds of creatures; and he hears a voice: “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.” There’s only one problem. Peter is a devout, law-abiding Jew, what today we would call a kosher Jew. Peter knows his Bible. Peter is well aware of all the dietary laws in the book of Leviticus; and the animals on the sheet are what an observant Jew would call “unclean.” The Bible, the Jewish Bible and our Bible, forbids eating these foods.

So Peter responds to the voice, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” Then comes the words that I hope you and I and every person on this planet will truly engrave upon their hearts: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” Hear that clearly. The Bible told Peter not to eat this food, it was profane/unclean. But the voice of God said, “Excuse me? Who made this stuff? Who are you to call it unclean? This was created by God; and, as the saying goes, “God doesn’t make junk.”

Now, if you read my last newsletter article, if you took our Daniel Plan Class, if you know me, you know I’m a strong proponent of healthy eating. But, this is not a story about food; and this is not a sermon about eating more vegetables and less sugar. No, the clean and unclean food is simply a metaphor for what is to follow.

For, as soon as Peter awakes from his vision, his dream, these three guys show up. Three Gentiles; and they want Peter to come to the home of their Gentile boss, Cornelius. Now, the key. . . An observant Jew of the first century would not enter the home of a Gentile; and they certainly would not share meals with a Gentile or stay in their home. It’s unclean. It’s profane. The Bible says so. But what does God say? “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” God doesn’t make junk.

And so, Peter invites the three men in and gives them lodging. And the next day he travels with them to the home of Cornelius where he spends time with

Cornelius and his family, sharing the Good News of God's amazing love as expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured, even upon the Gentiles. Peter baptized all that were present in the name of Jesus Christ, and he stayed with them several days. God doesn't make junk.

So what's the point of all this? Well, of course one important point is that this was the beginning of the spreading of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world. Of course, Paul may have had a much greater role in that spread; but here, in Acts 10 we have what can truly be called a divine call to share the Good News beyond its Jewish roots. But I see more than that in the story of Peter and Cornelius; because here, in Acts 10, I find a divine statement that the love of God is more important than the legalistic interpretation of scripture. Scripture called for Peter to refuse to go to the house of Cornelius. Scripture told Peter that the house of Cornelius was ritually unclean. But God said, "Don't call what I made unclean." God doesn't make junk.

Friends, you may know where I'm going with this. Today, there is a significant group of Christians that would call our LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters "unclean" because bits of scripture, lifted out of their original context, would claim that homosexuality is profane. But God created gays and lesbians just as sure as God created you and me, and God doesn't make junk. All people, gay people and straight people, black people and white people, young people and old people, rich people and poor people, American citizens and immigrants, all people were created by God, created in the sacred image of God, and God doesn't make junk.

Today we have a denomination divided over the issue of human sexuality. At a recent Clergy Executive Session of the East Ohio Conference, our bishop, Tracy Smith Malone, highlighted the history of the United Methodist Church as presented in Paragraph 104 of our Book of Discipline. Then she went on to highlight the things that John Wesley thought important as outlined in Paragraph 105. Upon conclusion she noted that, of all the things listed, there is not one mention of human sexuality. As she preached, a very famous quote of John Wesley came to my mind:

In things essential – unity;
in things nonessential – diversity;
in all things – love.

But issues of human sexuality are not our only dividing factor. Sociologists tell us that our nation is more polarized now than at any time since the civil war. We are divided over issues of immigration, race, religion, economics, social justice, and the list goes on. And what is all this division about? I'm currently reading a book called *The Anatomy of Peace* published by the Arbinger Institute. This book, which I highly recommend, proposes that all, hear me, *all we/they* divisions are a result of a lack of peace within us. All we/they divisions are the result of what we feel as a need for self justification – justifying our actions against

another; and, in that justification, we start to see they others as “objects” instead of fellow human beings.

It was several years ago that I resolved that, somewhere in the midst of every pastoral prayer that I do, I will pray for peace. And frequently, as I pray for peace in our world and in our communities, I also pray for peace in our hearts; for, if we truly have peace in our hearts, we will end the division. We will have unity in those essential matters of our faith, as we embrace our diversity with love.

Friends, a week from tomorrow, I will no longer be serving in the role of an appointed pastor; but the United Methodist ordination is an ordination for life. I will always be United Methodist clergy; and I will always embrace diversity; because I fully believe that diversity makes us stronger, stronger as a people, stronger as a nation, stronger as a church, and stronger as a world.

I’m not sure where the Spirit will lead me in the days and weeks following my retirement from appointed ministry. But I will pledge to you that, in those days and weeks ahead, I will continue to work for a church that truly embraces all people as full and equal members of the family of God. I will do all in my power to spread that Good News of God’s Amazing Love. God loves all people, and we are called to do likewise.

And I will continue to pray for peace, peace in our world and peace in every human heart. God created every person on this planet, created them in the holy image of God. May we learn to view every person in the light of that image, because God does not make junk.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

Help us love each other.

Help us accept each other.

Help us embrace each other.

And help each of us reach out to share the Good News,

to all people, in all places, at all times,

in our prayers, in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions.

Holy Lord, bring peace to every human heart.

This we pray in your holy name.

Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor

North Olmsted United Methodist Church