

“Big Enough”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

First United Methodist Church of Oak Park

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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?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:1-18)

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:31-35)

Does anyone remember what last week's Acts reading was about? It was about Tabitha, a dedicated disciple of Christ who lived in Joppa. Does anyone remember how our Acts reading ended last week? Does anybody remember the last word or the last verse of last week's first lesson? Nobody? Don't worry! I am not going to put the blame

on you for not remembering the verse! Actually, I would not have remembered it myself, had it not been for this week's lesson.

Let me read you the verse in question, the last verse of last week's Act's reading (9:43): "*Meanwhile he (Peter) stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.*" This certainly does not sound like a punch line, does it? It sounds more like a mere detail, right? But no, when you consider the context. A tanner is someone whose job is making leather from animal skins. And to do this, a tanner has to handle the dead body and blood of animals, which, in Jewish tradition, is considered "unclean." If you were a decent Jew, you would never stay with a tanner. No way! Then, even though not a punch line, this verse is significant enough for Luke to note and for us to remember.

Well, our first lesson today unfolds with the church leaders in Jerusalem questioning Peter. "*Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?*" Apparently, they were upset. They were concerned about Peter's acceptance of and fellowship with the uncircumcised, the unclean and unacceptable. Peter's staying with a tanner may not be the sole or the main issue here, but as we can hear from Peter defending himself before the council, that was the beginning of it all, literally and symbolically.

While Peter was staying in Joppa with a tanner, he was praying. While praying, he fell in a trance and saw a vision. He saw a sheet being lowered from heaven with all sorts of creatures on it – farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds, you name it. As he was taking a close look at it, a voice came from heaven, "*Get up, Peter; kill and eat.*" "*By no means, Lord, I've never eaten something that was profane or unclean,*" answered Peter. The voice spoke again from heaven, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*"

Approximately a week ago, on TV, CNN to be more specific, in an interview program, I heard a certain pastor quoting these verses to justify the consumption of shellfish, which, according to the Torah, is defined as non-kosher and hence prohibited from eating.¹ He was saying that the food restrictions of the Old Testament were lifted by this verse, that by this verse Christians are freed to eat anything. Of course, the show was not exactly about faith and food, but about faith and something else the pastor in question was adamant about, namely homosexuality. It is not my intention to enter into the details of the conversation, but I'd like to invite you to hear the rest of Peter's story, and form a judgment for yourselves.

Immediately after having the vision, Peter received a visit, but not in a trance this time. Three men showed up at the front door. They were Gentiles, non-kosher people, if you want. They wanted Peter to come with them to Caesarea to meet their master Cornelius, a Roman centurion. The Spirit told him to go, without making a distinction between Gentiles and Jews. So Peter went, taking with him six of his Jewish friends. Arriving at Caesarea, Peter was met by an entire household eager to learn more about Jesus and Christian faith. While Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. They spoke in tongues; they praised God; they were filled with joy! Peter saw no reason not to baptize them with water, so he did!

¹ CNN, Larry King Live, April 23, 2010.

An amazing story, isn't it? So, what do you think? Do you think that the vision that Peter saw and the voice that he heard were about food, and food only? No, I don't think so. This story is about acceptance, not of food, but of people. And I do not think that this story is simply about accepting Gentiles, either. Rather, this story is about embracing all those whom we label as "them" as opposed to "us." This story is about welcoming all those strangers or outsiders, the people that are different from us for whatever reason, and whom we discriminate against, drive out, dehumanize, or destroy.

I am grateful that Peter saw the connection between the vision he received while praying and the visitors that came knocking at the door. I am grateful for the gift of vision; I am grateful for the gift of discernment; and I am grateful for the gift of courage, yes courage to follow the Spirit's lead.

And I am also grateful for the gift of listening on the part of the leaders in Jerusalem. I am grateful for their gift of change and transformation. They began their council meeting quite upset and concerned. Yet, when Peter spoke, they listened. They were open to the new reality Peter envisioned. They could have said, "*How foolish! You are out of your mind, Peter! This just is not right!*" And yet, they did not persist in their opinions, perspectives, theologies, doctrines, policies. Instead, they quieted down. They listened. In the end, they were able to praise God for doing new things and bringing life to the Gentiles!

Where do you see yourselves in the story? Are you like Peter? Do you see a sheet being lowered from the heaven, with all sorts of creatures on it? Maybe, you do not necessarily find all of them safe or savory to eat. Yet, you know that the Spirit is telling you to eat. Or, are you like the leaders in Jerusalem, struggling with age-old conviction or frame of mind? Or, are you like the visitors at the door, knocking for acceptance and embrace?

Whoever we are and wherever we are on the journey of faith, let us be reminded today. God loves the world, the whole world. It is not God's intention to exclude anyone from the community of God's care. Yes, our God is big, big enough to redeem and embrace the whole of humanity. Who are we to restrain that love? Who are we to limit that mission?

Let us pray together for the gift of vision and discernment. Let us listen to each other and seek to discover where God's Spirit is leading. Let us expand the table of our communion until all God's children have a place around it. God's grace stands ready to make us one holy and loving people we are called to be. Amen!