

“Impartial God” GPPC 1-8-17
Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43

Think about your life for a moment. Can you recall a time when you were utterly convinced about someone or something. And maybe you'd held your view for years, decades, even a lifetime. You were absolutely certain about what you believed.

But then one day a truth was revealed that changed your mind and rocked your settled world with something different, something new, something that changed your life.

Ever had that happen to you?

This morning in the Book of Acts we read not only about Peter having a shocking change of mind but in fact the mind of the church changing in a revolutionary way.

But we need to go back in the story, to the beginning of chapter 10, in order to understand what happens, why it happens, and why it matters.

Chapter 10 starts with our meeting a Roman soldier named Cornelius. Cornelius is not a full-fledged Jew, but he is a man who is worshiping God, seeking God, and practicing some of the elements of

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the Jewish faith. God sends Cornelius to the town of Joppa to see a man named Simon Peter. So, off Cornelius goes, taking along three other people with him.

And just before Cornelius arrives, Peter, who is a Jewish Christian, has a strange vision in which unclean animals (four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds) are lowered from heaven on something like a sheet and offered for him to eat. This happens three times, and each time Peter says, “No way I’m eating that! I’ve never eaten anything profane or unclean.” And after three times, the “all you can eat, but refuse to eat buffet” is sucked back up into heaven.

The writer says Peter is “greatly puzzled” about the vision, trying to figure out what in the world has happened. And then Cornelius and his assistants show up. Peter invites the group to stay. And then the next day they talk and Peter says, “You know it’s unlawful for me, a Jew, to be around or visit with non-Jews, Gentiles. But God has shown me not to call anybody unclean. So why are you here, anyway?”

And Cornelius says, “Well, we’re here because God sent us to hear what you have to say, what God has *commanded* you to say.”

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All of this sets up what we hear Peter say in the reading this morning. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Now it’s easy for us, 21st century Christians, to miss just what a radical statement this was and is. One Bible scholar says, “To a first-century Jewish reader, this would have been close to blasphemy. This message flies in the face of ancient tradition that the Lord has set his heart on Israel and chosen her above all the nations (Exod. 19:5-6; Deut. 7:6-8) to be his special people... [But now] Anyone—Jew, Samaritan, Roman, Greek—anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” (Paul W. Walasky, *Acts*, 108.)

Can we imagine how difficult this must have been for Peter to accept? All those years of his knowing not only which foods were unclean but also which *people* were unclean. All those years of having a special status with God that others did not and could not have. All those years swept away. No wonder that sheet with the unclean animals had to be offered to him not once, not twice, but three times.

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Notice the statement does not deny that Israel is God’s chosen people. The chosen people God brought out of slavery in Egypt. The chosen people through whom God promised to bless the whole world. The chosen people from whom would be born the Savior of the World, Jesus the Christ. Israel is not rejected as God’s chosen people.

But faithful people of the time might have imagined that the circle of God’s love enclosed Israel while people outside that circle were lesser or unclean. Instead, God gives Peter a new sermon to preach. And in this sermon he says, “God doesn’t play favorites. God shows no partiality.”

As one New Testament professor writes, “In Jesus is now realized God’s intended vision of humanity ‘without distinctions’ (cf. 11:12). God fully accepts Gentiles and Jews on equal terms, and such labels as ‘clean’/’unclean’ no longer apply (cf. 10:28); indeed, they no longer exist. Not only can all persons be accepted by God; they can fully accept each other...” (Carl R. Holladay in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 1093.)

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And this is where the good news is a challenge and a gift, isn't it?

It's a challenge because we have a tendency to be prejudiced. A scholar says it's "deeply rooted in the human experience. People isolate themselves from others. People find their identity within a group, and fear that they will lose that identity if they do not guard their separateness. People find it difficult to relate to and associate with those who are different from themselves. People have a sense that they will lose their status within their own group if they dare to reach out to those on the outside...it is no simple matter to change our mind and to act in a different way. Prejudice runs deep within us." (Harry B. Adams in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, 231.)

Prejudice runs deep. Sometimes it is subtle and we may not even been aware of it. On more than one occasion over the years, I've imagined myself to be so enlightened, so fair-minded, and then something happened to make me see how much I need God to help me improve and lose my prejudices. Has that ever happened to you? So we join the Psalmist and pray, "Lord, clear me from hidden faults."

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We are steeped in prejudice. It begins with attitudes and comments. It's worsened by decades of unfair government policies in areas such as judicial sentencing, land use, housing, and education. And as we've seen in the news recently, prejudice leads to violence and murder. Hate groups and hate crimes are increasing in our country. And maybe we've experienced prejudice ourselves or we've been prejudiced against others and we feel guilty about it. It's easy to become discouraged.

But the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism call us in another direction. The baptism of Jesus and our own baptism declare that God loves all people without partiality. And because God loves all people without partiality, God is even now shaping us to be a community that loves that way too.

We aren't going to love each other perfectly. We won't be utterly impartial. But we're on a spiritual journey together, and as we do ministry together, share meals together, study our prejudices, talk about our hopes and fears, and worship together, God is helping us grow spiritually.

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Maybe you can see it in your own life or in the life of this congregation. Have you changed and become less prejudiced and more loving over say, the last twenty-five years? How about the last five years? Has this congregation become less prejudiced and more loving too? Can we see ways that God has brought us together and made us more vibrant with new people, and God has changed our minds about some subjects we had believed for a long time? I hope so.

Hatred in our country may continue to increase and the rhetoric of elected officials may grow even more inflammatory. But this congregation will be an alternative community. We will be a community of faith that strives to love all people as God does.

We'll make mistakes and it won't be easy. But in our striving to love as God does, we will receive the incredible blessings that come from loving others in all their particularities and diversity. We'll know the joy of welcoming outsiders, refugees, and people in need and speaking up for their rights. And in it all we will experience the exhilaration of being instruments of God's impartial love.

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Isn't it an exciting time to be a Christian? "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Amen. ©Jeff Paschal