

### ***Lord of All***

In the name of him who commanded us to love one another, dear friends in Christ: Peter was absolutely dumbfounded. To him it was so stunning a revelation that it was only superseded by the shock he experienced when first seeing the risen Lord Jesus on the day of his resurrection. It is with utter astonishment that he blurts out the words that he never imagined in a thousand years would pass his lips: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality”.

Why was that so staggering a revelation to him? It's because the whole biblical storyline is built on the premise that God does indeed show partiality. He plays favorites. Consider: when he had had it with mankind's increasing wickedness and decided to flood the earth, he placed his unmerited grace and favor on Noah and his family. He saved them and no one else. Then of all the idol-worshipping pagans on the planet, he decided to favor Abraham. He called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised to make of him a great nation. Then just follow the story through the generations. He chose Isaac over Ishmael; Jacob over Esau; to continue the line that led to Christ, he chose Judah over his other 11 brothers; when it came time to select a king, a man after God's own heart, he chose the young David over his 7 older brothers. You can't read the Bible and not notice that God shows partiality.

Consider the nation of Israel. To them alone God gave his holy law – after having delivered them from slavery in Egypt with mighty miracles. With them alone he made his covenant of grace. To them alone he gave the Promised Land. In the ancient world you could visit any city and find temples dedicated to a dozen different idol gods; but in Jerusalem alone, the capital of Israel, stood the one temple of the Lord God. And there was no idol there representing him. No, God was there. He himself was in the building.

Consider too that so many of the laws the Lord gave his people were specifically for the purpose of keeping them a people separate and apart from others. This was true in particular of the dietary laws. He told his people it was forbidden to eat this and this and this. The list of forbidden items was quite lengthy. Why did he do this? It's not because some food is sinful. Food is food. No, it's because eating food is mankind's principle communal activity. It's what we do together – especially back then when there was no such thing as prepackaged, individual meals. And if what you're serving is forbidden to me, then I can't eat with you. And if I can't eat with you, I can't fellowship with you. It's like being the only vegan at a family Thanksgiving gathering – only worse because this is a directive from God, not simply someone's virtue signaling of their concern for poor farm animals. Yeah, take your tofurky and go. Here we eat meat. And we enjoy it.

Anyway, back to Peter. He's steeped in this tradition of the Jewish people holding a special, favored place in the heart of God. It's ingrained into every fiber of his being, this notion that God loves us and nobody else. And now it's like the carpet is being pulled out from under his feet. And the Lord is the one pulling the carpet.

It started a few days earlier. He was sitting on the upstairs sundeck of the home of Simon the tanner in the coastal city of Joppa. In the kitchen below, Mrs. Tanner and presumably her daughters were preparing dinner, the noon meal, the main meal of the day. Delightful smells were wafting up to Peter. And naturally, while the women worked, Peter, like

most men, dozed off while he waited to be told to come to the table. It was then that the Lord sent him a vision. A large sheet of cloth descended from the sky. It opened to reveal all kinds of living creatures that were prohibited to eat under ordinances of the dietary laws. A voice called to Peter, "Arise. Kill. Eat." Peter refused. The very thought was repugnant to him. He's like, "Ew! No! Never. I've never eaten anything unclean. I never will." The voice responded, "Do not call 'unclean' what I have made clean." The same vision and ensuing conversation occurred two more times. Peter found it all most disturbing.

He woke with a start to find three strangers standing in front of him. They weren't Jews. They were Gentiles, Romans from Italy to be precise. They explained that they had been sent to fetch him by a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Peter was about to say something like, "No way. We Jews don't hang with you low-life, scum-sucking Gentiles. Besides, you Romans are our enemies, the unwelcome occupiers and oppressors of our Land", but he heard the Spirit speak to him in his head. "Go with these men." "Well, okay. If you say so. But this is creepy."

It took a couple of days for them to journey up the coast to Caesarea where Cornelius lived. The whole time Peter and a few of his Jewish companions were keeping a proper distance from the three men who were escorting them. They didn't lodge together. And they certainly didn't eat together. When they arrived at Cornelius' home, Peter was invited inside. That was awkward. Jews didn't go into the homes of Gentiles. They were considered unclean, the same as entering an occupied tomb. To Peter it was like being invited into the basement of an outhouse. El yucko.

Once inside, he met Cornelius. He was what the Jews called a "God fearer"; that is, a Gentile who believed in the Lord God – even he wasn't favored by him. Cornelius explained that a few days earlier, while he was praying, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel told him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter. The angel said, "This Peter will tell you of God's plan of salvation". "So, here we are Peter, and here you are. What have you got to say to us? We're all ears."

Well, we heard what Peter had to say in this morning's first reading – how the light was dawning on him at last that God didn't really show partiality. He doesn't play favorites. Instead, he chose one particular nation, Israel, through which to bring his Son into this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the promised Christ who was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power from on high. He went about doing good and performing miracles of healing. He was put to death on a cross; but God raised him up on the third day. By his death he atoned for the sins of the whole world. And now, through the proclamation of this good news, he brings the peace of God to all who believe – Jew and Gentile alike. This Jesus is Savior of all. He is Lord of all. And he will be the Judge of all. "To him all the prophets bear witness that *everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

I imagine that it was at this time suddenly dawning on Peter what the thrice repeated vision he had meant. The Lord had given the dietary laws to his people as a means to keep them apart from the other nations while he guarded the line that led to the birth of his Son. Now that Jesus come had and performed his mission of salvation, that separation was no longer necessary. Nor was it desirable. Indeed, the dietary laws were a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel. Thus the Lord was removing them. God declared all foods clean from here on out.

In verification of all this, while Peter spoke the good news of Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all the Gentiles who were with him in the house. It was a mini-Pentecost. And while this brought tremendous spiritual benefit to those upon whom the Spirit fell, it was

vital that Peter and the Jews with him see it happen. They had to know, see for themselves, that Gentiles received the same Spirit of God that had fallen on them. They had to see and understand that God showed no partiality. There is one Savior. There is one Spirit of truth. And there is one Baptism that unites people to both, which is why Peter ordered that these new believers be baptized: baptized into Christ's one Church.

And this is the main takeaway. One might ask why the angel, when speaking to Cornelius, didn't simply tell him about Jesus and the salvation God worked through him. Why go through all the trouble of sending for Peter and pulling him through the knot hole having to deal with things that he'd prefer to avoid? The angel could have preached the Gospel himself. The answer is that then there would have been two churches instead of one. There would have been a church for Gentiles like Cornelius founded upon the message of the angel, and another church for Jews like Peter founded on the witness of the Apostles. But Christ has only one holy and apostolic Church. Thus it was necessary to connect Cornelius and his household with that one Church. And in the process, it was necessary to knock down all the barriers that stood between Jews and Gentiles.

This was a hard thing for the early Church to come to grips with. To be sure, much of the Book of Acts and several Epistles of St. Paul have to do with the difficulty people had overcoming ingrained prejudices and preconceived ideas about the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers. We, living in our time, take it for granted. We know that God has only one people, one Church. But the reason we take it for granted is that those folks back then had to successfully work their way through it under God's direction.

And too, we all tend toward a certain amount of tribalism. We are most comfortable with people who look like us, who sound like us, and who share the same interests and politics. This has led some, especially here in the consumer conscious United States, to found congregations and in some cases entire church bodies geared toward attracting a particular segment or demographic of society. So they'll have a biker themed church or cowboy themed church or a church aimed at appealing to young upwardly mobile urban professionals. In some congregations are divided by age groups. While the adults worship in the sanctuary, the young are siphoned off into another room for "children's church". Growing out the Jesus movement of the 1960s, there's a whole "nondenominational" denomination geared toward attracting baby-boomers through its casual, laid back atmosphere, soft rock music, and theater style seating that includes a cup holder for your mucho mocha latte espresso – available at the Starbucks outlet in what would normally be called a vestibule, but there it's the lobby.

The point is that these attempts to appeal to certain segments of society are divisive to the body of Christ. One of our former synod officials was fond of saying "This is not your grandfather's church". He thought that in order to remain relevant, the church had to be constantly changing to keep up with trends in society. Everything had to be new and fresh and exciting. In other words, we have to keep repackaging the product in order to sell it. But I ask, what's changed? Aren't all people still sinners? Have the standards of God's judgment been altered? Isn't Christ still Lord and Savior of all? Is his Gospel message no longer relevant? Is Baptism still a washing of renewal and regeneration? Is there a different Holy Spirit for our age? If this isn't our grandfathers' church, indeed, if it isn't the one holy Christian Church founded upon the prophets and Apostles, what is it?

We ought to be striving in Christian love and forbearance for one church: a church that proclaims the one true Gospel of Christ crucified and raised again, where bikers and cowboys and yuppies and aging baby boomers and children and rich and poor and whites and blacks and

Republicans and Democrats – where *all* believers are welcomed and embraced and loved as the children of God they are in Christ Jesus, because he is Lord and Savior of all. God grant us the grace to work together toward this goal. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***