

WITHOUT HESITATION
Acts 10; 11:1-18
First Mennonite Church
June 21, 2009
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Peter, why did you eat with the Gentiles?

When Peter has to answer to the other leaders of the early church for his scandalous, boundary-crossing actions, the critical question is framed as a hospitality question: why has Peter shared table fellowship with “the others”? Why did the Jewish Peter invite Gentile visitors to eat with him and why did he accept the table fellowship of a Gentile household? And it’s not only table fellowship. They stayed overnight in the other’s household and traveled together. This is rule-shattering behavior!

The Scripture passage we are immersed in today, thanks to the efforts of our Junior High Fellowship (thank you very much, JYF!), narrates the hinge point that opens the doors to evangelism of the Gentiles. Some God-fearing Gentiles had already become believers; however, as Jewish proselytes, they were required to be circumcised and to observe the Jewish purity laws. Now, Cornelius and his household receive the Holy Spirit directly, retaining their identity as Gentiles.

Let’s think about this text as the story of two households exchanging hospitality. The Jewish household where Peter is lodging receives the three Gentile guests and the Gentile household of Cornelius receives Peter and his Jewish party as guests. In the act of hospitality, God’s presence and message are experienced in a direct and powerful way, just as we saw two Sundays ago in the story of Abraham receiving the three strangers (Genesis 18).

Hospitality satisfies hunger and ensures shelter. Hospitality breaks down barriers that divide. Hospitality allows the Gospel of Peace to be shared. Hospitality leads to conversion, to baptism, to a culturally integrated Body of Christ.

Peter has come to the coastal town of Joppa (present-day Jaffa), where he is engaged in a healing ministry that has brought many to faith in Jesus. While there, he is staying with Simon the tanner. This lodging arrangement suggests

Peter's openness toward persons disenfranchised by religious legalism. In this, he follows the example of Jesus, whose habit of eating with sinners, tax collectors, and other marginalized persons created a stir and prompted the Pharisees to censure him.

It's the middle of the day when the three men sent by Cornelius arrive in Joppa and inquire after Peter. The men have walked thirty miles to get there and are no doubt anxious for shelter from the heat, food, and rest. Since a meal is already being prepared for Peter, offering these three travelers the hospitality of Simon's household is *practically* very easy. But Peter needs to be *spiritually* prepared for the encounter and its implications.

The vision God supplies of animals that are no longer to be called unclean is part of Peter's preparation. Even though it takes him a while to sort out the full meaning of the vision, the negation of long-standing ritual practice is unambiguous. For all he argues with the Lord, Peter is repeatedly admonished to accept what had previously been unacceptable. "Kill and eat" is the command. God doesn't frame the new stance as one of tolerance or separate but equal spheres. Rather, Peter is told to join freely and fully in Gentile hospitality.

The directive Peter hears from the Spirit completes his preparation: "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them" (10:19b-20). When Peter receives the three men, he is receiving Cornelius' representatives, which is the social equivalent of receiving Cornelius himself. At the same time Peter is receiving ones whom God has sent -- messengers whose divinely-arranged task is to bring Peter and Cornelius together.

Hosting the stranger, as Abraham discovered, is like welcoming the Lord.¹ With the Spirit's words ringing in his ears, Peter does not hesitate to invite the Gentile emissaries, who remain standing by the gate (10:17), to come into the house, where they receive food and lodging.

The next day, Peter sets out with the men for Caesarea, the provincial capital where the Roman governors were headquartered. The city was the site of a major temple dedicated to Caesar and home to the Italian Cohort of the Roman

¹ Perhaps this is why Cornelius kneels down when Peter arrives and needs Peter's assurance that he is but a mortal. (10:25).

army. Their destination is the home of Cornelius. Cornelius is a military captain and a Roman citizen. Let's linger with those facts for a moment. What would Peter's attitude toward Roman soldiers likely be? Would he be inclined to seek them out? Do you think he has ever imagined himself in a centurion's home?

It's not only the Gentile barrier that is crashing down in front of Peter. It's also his understandable prejudice concerning the occupying empire. As commentator Chalmer Faw says: "Among all the uncircumcised, for [Peter] the worst are the Romans. They are the ones who conquered Israel, desecrated the temple, introduced many unclean pagan practices, and in the crucifixion of Jesus, have aided the enemies of the faith by killing the Messiah."²

Yet Peter is learning that God shows no partiality. Anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him (10:34). Cornelius' identity as a devout, God-fearing man who prays regularly and gives alms to the poor is the identity God shows to Peter. Peter is converted *from* his own prejudices and as a result, is able to convert Cornelius and his household *to* Jesus Christ.

When Peter arrives at Cornelius' house, he receives the gift of welcome and the material hospitality Cornelius has prepared. As a guest, Peter honors Cornelius with the gift God has prepared for him. Peter brings the Gospel Good News, the spiritual food of salvation. Soon after Peter enters the house, Cornelius invites him to say what the Lord has commanded (10:33b) and so Peter begins to preach about Jesus, who is "Lord of all" (10:36b).

While Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit descends upon the gathering. Peter has brought six believers along with him from Joppa; they serve as witnesses to the Gentiles' baptism in the Spirit and by water. Acts 10 closes with the simple statement that Peter is invited to stay with Cornelius for several days.

The Holy Spirit guides Peter in the way of truth: "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (10:28b)." "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us" (11:12). And what the Spirit says is reinforced by the experience of shared hospitality. Cornelius and his household become Peter's companions—companions in the sense of "with bread" ("com panis"), as well as a shared journey and spiritual conversation.

²Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts*. Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: 1993), 140.

Remember the story of the risen Lord walking on the road to Emmaus with two of the disciples (Luke 24)? The disciples do not know who he is until they eat together. Having urged the stranger to partake of their hospitality, they finally recognize Jesus when they sit at table together and break bread with him. The disciples are then able to see with new eyes. Stereotypes and fear of difference melt away when we get to know strangers for who they are, when we encounter the people behind the labels, when we eat and worship and journey together.

Thus far, we have been considering hospitality as a vehicle—a vehicle for understanding, reconciliation, and conversion. Hospitality is also an *imperative*. Here is a distinction worth thinking about: “In most situations, we get ourselves into trouble by what we do: adultery, lying, stealing, jealousy, and so on. Not so in hospitality: Our error comes through what we fail to do. When it comes to hospitality we becomes less by what we omit doing. Every time we turn away, we drop a little of our humanity.”³ And every time we turn away, we miss the opportunity to see Jesus in the face of the stranger and to share the good news.

“Sharing” is an important dimension of our congregational life. We use the term as shorthand for caring about each other and keeping up with significant developments in each others’ lives, so that we can respond in Christian love. Another word for hospitality is sharing. Hospitality means sharing our fellowship, our abundance, and our love of Jesus. First Mennonite Church has some marvelous stories to tell in this regard. God has tapped this assembly of believers to welcome many lonely wayfarers: some are materially depleted and some are isolated by social prejudice and misunderstanding; all are spiritually hungry.

Whenever we are tempted to put up or leave up barriers to Christian hospitality, let us prayerfully re-engage the story of Peter and Cornelius. Let us remember that Jesus is the way and that he, not works or rituals, supplies our purity. Let us admit our prejudices and private fears and turn them over to God to be healed. Let us listen for the Spirit’s inclusive movement on behalf of the reconciliation God intends for “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col. 1:19). Let us follow the Spirit’s leading and extend hospitality, sharing without hesitation!

³Father Daniel Homan & Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), 41. We can also speak of the difference between sins of commission and sins of omission.

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