

The Book of Acts: A Spirit-Fueled Adventure!
“Jesus Christ, the Lord of All”
Sermon on Acts 10:1-36 (6/3/16)
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This summer at McCabe, we're on a journey through the book of Acts. And, in recent weeks of this series, we've been thinking a lot about *conversion*, about the change of mind and heart that comes when we find ourselves convicted, challenged...when we realize who we have been and what we have believed needs to change in some significant way.

The story we heard read from Acts 10 is sometimes called “the conversion of Cornelius,” but, really, it's also the conversion of *Peter*.

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In today's story from Acts 10, two different people are given visions from God: Cornelius, who was a Gentile – a wealthy, Roman soldier – and Peter, a faithful Jew and apostle of Jesus.

Cornelius believed in God and was generous to the poor, but he had not heard the message of Jesus. God gave him a vision and, in that vision, he was told to send messengers to the town of Joppa to find some guy named Simon Peter...to bring this Peter to his home and to listen to whatever he had to say.

The next day – in Joppa – Peter *also* received a vision from God. He went up on the roof to pray...realized he was hungry...and then, for whatever reason, he fell sound asleep and saw something strange:

In his sleep, Peter saw a vision of all sorts of unclean animals on a sheet, being lowered down from the sky. As the animal-filled sheet was lowered, a voice said, “Peter, get up! Kill these and eat them.” In response, Peter exclaimed, “Lord, I can't do that! I've never eaten anything that is unclean and not fit to eat.”

What Peter heard next would change the course of Christianity, for the voice said, “When God says that something can be used for food, don't say it isn't fit to eat.” Other translations of the Bible put it this way: “*Do not call anything 'unclean' that God has made clean.*”

This strange image and message happened three times during Peter's vision and when he awoke, he pondered just what exactly it was supposed to mean.

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We'll get back to the story in Acts 10 in a few minutes...but, before we continue with the actual story, we need to walk through some details that will help us understand what's happening within it.

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As a bit of very basic, background information, Jesus was Jewish, as were Jesus' earliest followers – including his original twelve disciples.

At first, there *were* no “Christians,” just Jews who began to follow Jesus and who then came to believe he was the Messiah. Well, as Jesus' message continued to spread among Jews after his death, resurrection, and ascension, controversy began to boil between the Jews who believed in Jesus and the Jews who did *not*.
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The Jewish people had been waiting for centuries for God to send them a Messiah: they'd been expecting the Messiah to be a great military leader who would usher in an age of earthly freedom. Jesus did not do that, so it was no wonder many Jews didn't believe he was the Messiah.

Those who *did* believe he was the Messiah, believed that, in Jesus, God had sent a *different kind* of Messiah...one who offered a *different* kind of freedom: freedom from sin and freedom from the power of death.

Things became tense in the Jewish community. After all, when some of your people believe the Messiah *has* come, while others are still *waiting* for the Messiah to come, division will arise.

In the midst of that growing division, Jesus' earliest followers continued to faithfully practice their Jewish traditions while also sharing the message of Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah.

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The main reason this is important to keep in mind is that, in addition to their beliefs about God, Jewish people *did* things other people didn't do as part of their religious life – namely, male circumcision and abiding by a strict set of dietary laws.

These practices set Jewish people apart from non-Jews: these practices reminded them they belonged to God...that their lives were to look *different* than the lives of non-Jews. The focus of Acts 10 is on Jewish dietary practices – which were far more strict than the dietary practices of most Gentiles. Gentiles tended to abide by the “eat *whatever* you want *whenever* you want” dietary law.

Jews, on the other hand, have a list of things they *can* eat and things they *cannot* eat. This list of eating “dos and don'ts” comes from Leviticus chapter 11 and Deuteronomy chapter 14. God gave these rules to Moses and his brother Aaron when the Jewish people were in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt.

What the Jewish people *could* eat was called “clean” and what they *couldn't* eat was called “unclean.”

The basic list of “**clean**” foods includes: vegetables, honey, ripe fruits, nuts, milk products, grain, beef, mutton, venison, certain poultry, fish with scales and fins, and some insects.

The basic list of “**unclean**” foods includes: pork, rodents, birds of prey,

carnivore mammals, web-footed birds (and their eggs), shellfish, all fish without both scales and fins, reptiles, and some insects. (Got it?)

There are multiple schools of thought regarding why certain foods are clean and others unclean...but, for today, it's most important we keep in mind how crucial the dietary laws are to Jewish faith and practice.

Faithful Jews keep the dietary laws. This is true today and it was most certainly true during Jesus' time and in the time when the apostles were sharing Jesus' message after his ascension into heaven. Though Peter believed in Jesus, he was still a faithful Jew.

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When I first became a vegetarian back in the summer of 1995, I was extremely strict: I read every label to make sure there was no meat nor meat product in the ingredients list and I asked many a waiter, "Is there any sort of animal stock in that soup / sauce / etc.?"

It was tedious, but my family and I eventually figured out what to watch for in order to remain "faithful" to my new diet of choice. I have since relaxed on some things...but I continue to choose to eat a vegetarian diet. And, because it's a choice, I could quit any time.

This is not really true for Jewish people who adhere strictly to their dietary laws. Following them is not a leisurely choice for those who want to remain faithful to God's law. It's an absolute *must*.

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So, in Acts 10, both Cornelius and Peter received visions from God. Cornelius's vision, again, was pretty simple: "Go find Simon Peter." *Peter's* vision – the vision of the unclean animals descending from heaven on a sheet and God telling him to kill and eat those animals, as well as God telling him not to call "unclean" that which God deemed "clean" – well, that vision was not so simple... because, for Peter to take it seriously, meant a serious conversion.

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As the story goes, Cornelius' men showed up not long after Peter had his vision... the Holy Spirit told Peter he should go with them...and so Peter grabbed a couple of the other apostles and they all headed to Cornelius' house in Caesarea.

Cornelius had gathered *many* of his friends and relatives to hear whatever it was Peter was going to say to them...so Peter arrived to quite the houseful. And they were all Gentiles. Every single one of them was "unclean."

See, by eating unclean food meal after meal, day after day, year after year, by strict Jewish standards, Gentiles not only *ate* what was unclean, but they actually *became* unclean themselves.

And that which was “unclean” was to be avoided by faithful Jews at all costs.

To think about entering the world of the Gentiles – the world of the “unclean” – was surely terrifying for Peter. It was a paradigm shift he hadn't anticipated making. But God asked him to make it anyway.

“Do not call anything 'unclean' that God has made clean,” the voice had told Peter. So...when he arrived at Cornelius' house full of Gentiles, Peter said, “You know that we Jews are not allowed to have anything to do with other people. But God has shown me that he doesn't think anyone is unclean or unfit.”

And, later, Peter even added, “Now I am certain that God treats all people alike. God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right, no matter what nation they come from. This is the same message that God gave to the people of Israel, when he sent Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, to offer peace to them.”

After Peter finished speaking, Cornelius and his household were baptized, making them the first official Gentile converts to Christianity in the book of Acts.

If Peter had stayed away from them because he deemed them “unclean,” they never would have heard the good news of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all.

But God gave Peter a new vision...a vision of who was welcome and who was not. And, in this new vision, God basically said, “Everyone is welcome! Don't you be calling *any* of my children 'unclean'!”

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Peter's vision was not only about *what* Christians can eat: it was also about *with whom* we can eat...and who we should welcome to our tables. “Everyone is welcome,” God said. “Don't you be calling *any* of my children 'unclean'!”

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Honestly, there's a lot about this I find challenging – because it means I should welcome to my table – and into my life – people I'd really rather not have there: people I disagree with politically, people from cultures I don't understand, people who have hurt me...people that I, for whatever reason, have deemed “unclean.”

But they are not unclean to God. Because Jesus Christ is Lord of *all*, the good news of his love and power is good news for everyone. And thanks be to God for that.

[Move to Communion table.]