

[sermon Peter's dream 2019]

2nd SUNDAY IN EASTER

ACTS 10:1-17, 34-38; MT 27:45-51

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Peter's Vision

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.



One of our favorite restaurants to visit when we're in the Seattle area is called The Crab Pot down on the pier close to the famous Pike Place Market. And, not surprisingly, their signature entrée is called *The Seafeast* – it's a pot of King crab, Dungeness crab, Snow crab, shrimp in the shell, steamed clams, Pacific mussels, Andouille sausage, corn on the cob & red potatoes.

They cover the table with butcher-paper, bring you a bib, a stack of napkins, and a mallet. Then when supper's ready, the servers bring out a steaming pot and dump the contents all over the table right in front of you...

It is an amazing feast of some of the best sea-food in the world...

ABSOLUTELY NONE OF WHICH we would be able to eat...if we belonged to Peter's church in the Holy Land in the months and, early years following Jesus' resurrection.

Although the gospel writers tell us that Jesus *constantly* ate with tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, apparently the disciples retreated to safer ground after they'd said goodbye to the Lord. While the Apostle **Paul** had caught Jesus' open-armed vision and was out in the world welcoming ANYONE into the church...the disciples back at home...were not.

They had taken a few steps back from the edge to which Jesus had led them, had sought somewhat safer ground, had taken a stand on more familiar land –

even if it was less tolerant, more restrictive, and nowhere near as welcoming as Jesus was with people who had been marginalized because they were different, foreign, less pious, more sinful...take your pick.

But, in a way that's understandable...Peter and the other disciples are simply following the pattern of human nature, right? When tragedy strikes, when catastrophes happen, when our world is turned upside down, when we're shaken to the core, we all take a few steps back to those places that used to offer us a sense of safety, security, and sanity...

For Peter and his posse of piously perplexed partisans, it obviously meant returning to what they knew best – following the precepts of the biblical laws and the structure of their temple worship.

So here's some background. The Jewish religion into which Jesus was born, was centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. Each town had its own local church called a synagogue, but that was for listening to scripture and ordinary worship.

The TEMPLE was where you went for the high holy days, or for when something weighed heavily on your heart, something for which you would need to offer a sacrifice to accompany your prayer. You can get an idea about how the system worked simply by looking at **our** sanctuary.

When you entered the temple mount, the first gathering area was called the **Court of Gentiles** – that's where all the **business** took place – **just like here at First Lutheran**. Kids selling Hy-Vee cards, Women selling Christmas ornaments, anything like that takes place out there in the **narthex**. Anyone was welcome in the court of Gentiles.

Any **Jewish** person, could enter the next area called the **Court of Women** – let's say from those doors to half-way up the pews here. That's where singing, poetry and teaching took place...for any Jewish person...but no foreigners.

Then, although the **men** could be in the Court of Women, the **women** could not enter the **Court of Men**. That area stretched, let's say, from these pews to the altar rail. It's where all the important stuff happened, particularly the sacrifice of the animals.

The next section in was called the **Court of the Priests** – on the other side of the communion rail – obviously only priests were allowed in there.

And, finally, the inner most sanctum of the Temple was called the **Holy of Holies**



Traditional Judaism regarded the Holy of Holies as the place where God's presence was manifested. So imagine a thick, heavy curtain stretching from the top of the ceiling, all the way to the floor, covering the cross and the altar –two of the most visually powerful symbols of our faith. Obviously the Jews had their own symbols of faith, but you get the picture.

So fearsomely holy was the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, that only one priest, on only one day each year, could enter it. His job was to burn incense and offer prayers to God on behalf of all of God's people on the Day of Atonement.

In fact, the priest who was picked to enter the Holy of Holies, had to have a rope tied around his ankle so that if he were ever to suffer a health emergency, or fall, the priests could pull him out without disturbing the holiness of Almighty God.

So...that's the Temple in Jerusalem, and the Holy of Holies was the one focal point, on the entire planet, of God's majestic presence.

Now, how close could people get to God if they were **foreigners**, gentiles, anyone who ain't one of them??? **OUTSIDE THOSE WALLS**

How close could people get to God's Holy Presence if they were...**women**?
PEWS

How close could people get to God's Holy Presence if they were...**men**?
RAIL

It was absolutely impossible for ordinary people like us to have open access to God, right? And yet...thanks be to God it didn't stay that way!!...

Let's go back just for a second to the story of Jesus' crucifixion. In Matthew 27, verses 50-51, we're told: *Jesus cried with a loud voice, and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom...*

The curtain guarding the HOLY OF HOLIES...

The curtain that kept God separated from...virtually everyone on the planet...

The curtain that covered God's presence in secrecy...

was torn in two from top to bottom...

WOW!!! What in the world does that **mean**???

Any ideas???

Could it be that our access to God is no longer restricted?

Or that...God has been *let out of the cage* free to fly to wherever and whomever is in need of the Lord's healing presence...

Or...both?!?! A person's access to God is no longer restricted...AND...God is out and about in our world, blessing all people who seek a sense of peace and belonging, hope and acceptance, grace and love.

This is the foundation for today's bible story about Cornelius – an episode that is absolutely vital to the success or failure of the Church.

Here's what I mean: either Cornelius and his kind – (think you and me and every other sinner who has ever lived or will ever live!) – either we are welcomed into God's church with open arms, or the Church dies on the vine as those law abiding followers who remember Jesus die off one by one...until there are none...

You remember in the Garden of Gethsemane when one of the disciples cut-off the ear of the high priest's slave? Jesus said to him, *Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.* Adapting it to our setting for today, we could say,



Those who live by works and law will die by works and law...

Though Peter and the disciples SAY that God welcomes ALL people to worship him as Lord, they're ALSO telling every foreigner to the faith that a person can only be a TRUE Christian if they BELIEVE IN JESUS *and*...follow the laws of the Old Testament.

They were wrong because the curtain of the temple was torn in two...

The risen Christ has sent his followers out to make disciples of all nations...

The Apostle Paul is out there in the power of the spirit inviting, welcoming, encouraging all people to just trust in God, to feel Christ's love, to find the Spirit's gifts of peace and joy and contentment by being wrapped in the wonders of God's gift of grace for us and all people through faith in Jesus Christ...

It's a pretty clear message to us, right???

But, as usual, the disciples screw it up...

So...you heard the story.

Cornelius as three strikes against him, so he should be out. 1) He's a foreigner. 2) He's not Jewish. And 3) He's an officer in the occupying Roman army. He has no business hoping to be welcomed into God's family of faith.

Well, thankfully, **he didn't know the rules.** We're told that he's just a righteous man, that he generously supports those in need, and that he prays to God constantly. So one day God taps him on the shoulder and says, in effect, *Cornelius, my friend, you're going to help me teach Peter a lesson that he will never forget.*

The Lord tells him to send for Peter...

While that surprise starts making its way to good old Peter, we hear that he, like Cornelius, is also praying. But when his tummy rumbles, he falls into a trance and sees a vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven.

And it's full of vile creatures – unclean animals of all shapes and sizes...



Although Peter's vision was probably a little more realistic than these cuddly animals...nevertheless, they were all considered unclean, yet a voice commands the disciple: "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

Not once, not twice, but three times the experience is repeated. And each time Peter stands up on his little soap box, and proudly proclaims his epicurean purity...*My lips have never sampled such unclean food!!!*

Finally, the voice puts him in his place by proclaiming, ***What God has made clean, you must not call profane...***

As soon as the voice stops speaking, the men from Cornelius knock on the door and ask Peter to come with them...

Now part of the story that was cut out of our passage for today tells us what happens when Peter first arrives at the house of Cornelius. He's welcomed in, sees the house is

- full of other foreigners, people who do not follow the O.T. Law,
- men who are not circumcised,
- families who do not eat kosher food...and what does he say???

Quote: ***You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a foreigner; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.***

Wow...This started out as a story about what food good people should not eat...and ends up being a story about the good food that's offered for all people to eat: the body and blood of Jesus Christ, given and shed, for you and for me and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.

This is a story about those whom God has made clean by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's about who is welcome in the Church and who is not.

The disciples were convinced that: TRUE Christians, that MATURE Christians, that the BEST Christians lived by the rules – avoiding pork and shell fish, following the law, and proving to everyone who's the best and most blessed by God.

But remember what happened back in the Temple at the moment when Jesus died...



The curtain covering the Holy of Holies, that which separated God from everyone, that whole system that made painfully clear who was close to God and who was not, THAT curtain was torn in two from top to bottom...and ever since then, the Spirit of God is blowing where it will...

The story has **never** been about **WHAT** God **makes** clean, but **WHO** God **makes** clean.

As the Lord once told Peter and the other disciples, *It's not what a person eats that makes them unclean, but what comes out of their mouths and is reflected in their lives that makes a person unclean.*

It's the story of God telling Peter to turn around, to stop looking back and start looking forward into a brave, new world where people are neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free...but all are one in Christ.

It's the story of how Cornelius is God's agent of truth. When Peter sees the Spirit active even in these foreigners' lives, his eyes are opened and he confesses: ***God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.***

And it's the story of how through Jesus' death on the cross, God has made all people clean.

God has forgiven our sins,

God has claimed us as his own,

God has cleansed our spirits of selfishness and fear, and filled our hearts with grace that binds us one to another, one to everyone as children of the promise.

It's the story of how we celebrate the good news that the curtain is torn, that the Holy Spirit is out of the cage, that God's grace triumphs over all, that all things and all people have been made clean, through the gift of Jesus Christ!

And our response should be what little children everywhere say when you finish telling them a story that they love. They smile and say...***Tell it again!!*** That's our job. Thanks be to God.

Amen!!