

As God built the Christian church two thousand years ago, he used the Jewish faith tradition as his starting place, for it was the birthplace of his original revelation for the redemption of humanity. But it was not an altogether smooth transition. This morning we're going to talk about a relationship which was literally created in heaven by God himself in order to finalize the fulfillment of this revelation and about what this relationship has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

ACTS 10:9-16

On the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Our reading today was about two people whom the Lord used to transform the very localized, exclusive faith of the Jews into Christianity, a faith for all nations. The reading began, **"On the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray" (v.9).** The **"they"** of **"they were on their journey"** refers to the previous paragraph where three men were sent out by the other key character in the story. His name was Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion who loved God and gave charitable gifts to the Jewish people. God saw his devotion, and he gave him a vision, telling him to send for Peter.

Peter was the head disciple at this time. He oversaw the church in Jerusalem, and to confirm his authority, God filled him with supernatural power; just the day before he had raised a woman from the dead. You might be familiar with the

story: Her name was Tabitha in Hebrew and Dorcas in Greek, of whom it was said, **“she abounded with kindness and deeds of charity” (Acts 9:36).**

The Scripture reads that it was the **“sixth hour,”** or twelve noon, when Peter was praying on the roof of the house where he stayed. He was in Joppa, the home of Tabitha, a port town on the Mediterranean. Doubtless, he knelt for prayer, facing southeast, toward the temple in Jerusalem. He was a good Jew.

Peter had grown a lot. Remember how before Pentecost he was the blustering disciple, sometimes saying the most ridiculous things, and how he was sometimes too tired to pray? But at this juncture, however, we see that as a leader, he had devoted himself to the discipline of prayer.

We read that as Peter prayed, **“he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance” (v.10).** He was kneeling toward the holy temple, and his stomach growled. He had an entourage at his beck and call, and so he ordered lunch? in the middle of his prayers? Okay, so Peter’s not perfect yet.

But God was in-charge, and he gave Peter a vision that was more powerful than his appetite, a vision that would turn his world upside-down. God said, you’re hungry? Try this on for size: We read, Peter **“saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air” (vv.11-12).**

A giant tarp with animals in it descended from heaven, which means this vision was from God. The animals identified signified all animals, except fish, including clean and unclean animals, according to Jewish laws and rituals.

With the vision of the animals, came the voice of God. He said, **“Rise, Peter; kill and eat” (v.13).** During his earthly ministry, Jesus declared certain Old Testament laws no longer relevant, like the laws regarding the Sabbath. He had said, **“The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27),** meaning that the idea of Sabbath rest is for our renewal, and that we can be renewed any day of the week. Here with Peter, God removed with one fell swoop all the laws concerning food.

Some speculate that the Old Testament eating laws had to do with health risks, such as those associated with eating undercooked pork, which may be true, but not all of the laws are that obvious. For example, four legged creatures which could be eaten were limited to those which **“chewed the cud”** and had cloven or split hooves (Deuteronomy 14:7). That excludes not only pigs but also camels and rabbits. Why? We don't know, except God said it.

So God told Peter to **“kill and eat,”** and Peter said to God, **“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (v.14)**. In his earlier life, Peter often said and did outrageous things, even wielding a sword in the Garden at Christ's arrest, cutting off a man's ear (which Jesus promptly fixed). However, he was never a slouch when it came to his devotion to God. Being a working class fisherman never got in the way of his relationship to the Lord.

This speaks to men today. In my own family, there was a lot of peer pressure not to be a sissy, not to be soft around the edges, but to be self-sufficient, to be a man's man, and all that. But it's not easy to be self-sufficient when your belly's full of beer and whisky. If it's whisky or Jesus, I vote Jesus. And if you do the same, I guarantee your probability for success in this life is significantly greater. Be like Peter: Take risks, push the envelope, even wield a sword, and when it comes to your relationship with God, be as bold as ever.

We read **“the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.”** ¹⁶**This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven” (vv.15-16)**. Last week we studied Paul's conversion, and we saw how his world was turned upside-down when he realized Jesus was God and that he'd been killing his disciples. Peter's world was also turned upside-down as he was told to change his understanding of what it means to be obedient to the Lord.

When God spoke to Peter, I bet he remembered what Jesus had said earlier about food. He had said, **“whatever (food) goes into the man from outside cannot defile him,** ¹⁹**because it does not go into his heart, but That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man.** ²¹**For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,** ²²**deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness.** ²³**All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:18-23).**

I'll wager that everyone here has heard the expression, "The devil made me do it," but I'll also bet that if you're under 50 you didn't know that that expression was from the sitcom, "Maude," played by Bea Arthur. Every time her husband or girlfriend called her out for one of her wicked antics, she'd say, "The devil made me do it." Nice try. According to Jesus, we don't need any help from the devil because we have plenty of wickedness in our own hearts to generate enough pain and distress to go around. If you want to turn your life around, begin here (in your heart).

So it would seem that Jesus had already addressed the matter of dietary restrictions in the Old Testament during his earthly ministry. But Peter needed a reminder. And the occasion was perfect: Cornelius, the Roman centurion who loved God, had been told by God to send for Peter.

As the story continues, because of Peter's new understanding of God's love and mercy, he was able to give witness to the Gospel to Cornelius. Cornelius believed in Jesus, he received the Holy Spirit, and Peter baptized him into the Body of Christ. And this is how the exclusive, localized faith of the Jews came to all nations.

Later in the Book of Acts, Peter was involved in resolving a dispute between the Jewish Christians and the non-Jewish Christians. The question was, what kinds of Jewish traditions should be imposed on the non-Jews. Peter said, **"Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the Gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us; ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15:7-11).**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God transformed the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and he transformed Peter by **"cleansing their hearts by faith."** There was nothing they could've done to have deserved this, but they were **"saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus."**

I was once an outsider, but not anymore. For God declared that I am his son, and I believed, and I was **"saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus."**

You were once an outsider, but not anymore. For God declared that you are his son, his daughter, and you believed, and you were **“saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.”**

This story about Cornelius and Peter began with their preparation by God. God spoke to Cornelius himself in a vision to send for the disciple. And then the Lord spoke to Peter, and he gave him the vision of the animals coming down from heaven. God was in charge of the whole thing. He prepared the men’s hearts for their encounter one with another, turning their world’s upside-down, showing them that all their preconceived ideas about him were wrong, and that he was going to create a whole new thing.

When I’m discouraged, I remember that the Lord has cleansed my heart by faith not unlike the miracle he did in the hearts of Peter and Cornelius.

Brothers and sister in Christ, this week know that the Lord has already made you whole, your hearts have been cleansed because of Christ on the Cross and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us give thanks.

This week, know that God’s preparing us for a new thing. Do not be afraid for he is in charge.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.