

New Testament Lesson—Acts 10:9-23, 34-43

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up & went with them, & some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Imagine you've been taught the same thing by everyone you know and love for your entire life. Let's see... Imagine, for example, you've been taught from a very young age that men with long hair are to be avoided. You are to steer clear of us! Any other guilty parties in the building? Anybody else a bit too follically-liberal here this morning?

See: You've been taught we're suspicious folks—not to be trusted. We're sketchy and seedy. Some even claim we're evil—letting our hair grow as to reach down toward our Master that dwells in the fiery underworld below our feet.

If you're around us too much, our beliefs and habits could rub off on you—might even corrupt you. Heck, you may even start growing out your *own* hair! Or, getting a long wig as the case may be... You were taught that it's those *outside* the community—it's those *outside* the faith—it's *those people* that let it all go and let it all grow... Not us... not you...

Now, none of us can help where we're born. But, alas, this is what you've been taught all your life about people that look like me—sometimes directly by those you trust, and sometimes indirectly through offhand comments about shagginess and whatnot—how if that guy isn't careful, the devil's gonna reach up and climb his hair like a ladder!

Ok... *Now*, I want you to imagine that you've just received a vision from the Lord! The vision is incredible—as real and as clear as the day is long—no question that this is from God! But darn, if it isn't confusing as all get out!

Because, friends: the vision you've just received has shown you a throng of diverse peoples. And guess what? All of them had long, long hair—long hair of all kinds and styles. You saw wavy red hair, dark dreaded hair, straight black braided hair, beaded hair, thin but long grey hair, dangly hair as bright and yellow as the sun, and was that a perm?—and that's just a fraction of the kaleidoscope of colors and shapes you saw!

Now, what in the world are you supposed to make of this? Where do you go from here? Where do you go after being taught to avoid a certain thing every day to, all of a sudden, being commanded by God Almighty to unlearn what's been passed down for generations—to unlearn those biases—to, in fact, make your way *toward* those people—to befriend them—to get to know them...

And in order to do that (most of all), you've got to let go of your prejudice. You've got to let go of your judgment of those devillocks—of those with long hair.

And there can be no debate as to what God intends, either. Because within that vision, you were gifted with hearing the voice of God! You (let's just ya Peter) hear a voice say: "Get up, Peter; grow and comb."

Of course, I'm using a rather ridiculous example to talk about the very real difficulty and complicated emotions Peter must've felt. Jewish food laws—kosher laws—had kept him and his people safe since the days of Moses. It was one of the main ways they distinguished themselves as Jewish and worshipped God in their daily lives: *We* don't eat the foods *those* people eat.

But now, God was doing something new—new yes, but not unprecedented. After all, didn't Isaiah proclaim long before then that ultimate vision of God's house being a house of prayer for all peoples? This was just a big step toward that beautiful vision.

For Peter, the end of these food laws didn't mean an end to his Jewishness. But it did mean the beginning of new relationships—new friendships and communities that just wouldn't have been possible before. Because as we well know, sharing a meal—breaking bread together tears down walls and reframes what divides us—making those things look (well) silly.

It's why Jesus transformed an ancient meal celebrating and remembering God's liberation into something remembering God's Son and our liberation from sin and death and division—a Communion of the people that rips to shreds everything that separates us.

An anonymous thinker writes this: "Food is a binding agent, a social glue. Sharing food is the heart of hospitality. The welcoming of the stranger is common to cultures and religions the world over. Breaking bread, and the conversation that comes with it, breaks down barriers. Turns strangers into friends. Bread is wonderful."

I can imagine Peter wrestling with these changes in his heart. I can imagine his feeling torn—torn about experiencing foods he'd always thought of as unclean—torn about approaching a powerful Gentile—a Roman centurion just like those who killed his Master.

But he won't deny the will of the Holy Spirit. No, he's done enough denying. I can imagine Peter recalling the story of Noah: God had already washed away the unclean animals in the flood. And I can see him remembering God's creative acts in the beginning—how God made and calls *all* of Creation “very good.”

Long ago, Peter's ancestors were given a song written by a musically gifted shepherd who grew up to rule and show us that God not only loves, but that God can call and use anyone no matter how flawed they are—no matter how many sins they rack up...

King David wrote: *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...* not so we can hold God's might and protection over those enemies, no...but through fellowship—by breaking bread with them—by *communing* with them, they might cease to be our enemies altogether and instead become our friends, our brothers, our sisters, our siblings in Christ.

So let's make sure we set out some plates for “those people.”

Amen.