

File: Acts 10

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen!

Have you ever bought a piece of furniture from Ikea? You see a piece of furniture assembled on the showroom floor and you think to yourself wow that's really nice, it's just what I'm looking for. How hard can it be to put this together? You get it home, open it up, spread everything out and look at the instructions and you say to yourself, who the heaven wrote these instructions, they don't make sense. So you get started and you end up with a bunch of left over pieces and say to yourself, well this is good enough I hope it holds together.

Sometimes The Bible feels a little bit like that. You look at your Bible and it looks nice, maybe a leather cover, maybe you have a case for it with a dove embossed on the front with a pocket to hold your pen for underlining, perhaps there are pictures inside or study helps that try to help you understand what it means and it all looks well and good. Until you open it up and start reading. And you say to yourself, "wow I'm not sure this makes sense." And you try to do what it says or become the person it talks about and things don't work out the way you anticipated and you get frustrated and say to yourself—well that's good enough and set it aside.

In our reading this morning from Acts 10 God does something that made absolutely no sense and gave what at first were confusing instructions to Peter and Cornelius. They were pretty sure how they did life was good enough and good enough definitely wouldn't include any kind of relationship with each other. Yet God drew together the last two people in the world you'd ever expect. Just like with Peter and Cornelius God wants to push the envelope with us and make us think and experience things outside of our box and comfort zone for our benefit and for the benefit of others and their experience of Christ because people can experience Christ through us.

It's a pretty bizarre scene. Peter has a dream with this sheet coming down from heaven with a bunch of animals. In the dream the voice says "Peter get up and kill and eat". This was not a dream about getting a trophy buck, turning it into venison sausage and hanging the rack in your garage. As a good Jew the animals in the dream were animals that he was forbidden to eat according to the dietary and religious laws in Leviticus. They were all animals considered to be "unclean". The voice in the dream said "do not call anything unclean that God has made."

Peter's dream became a bit of a nightmare in that God had Peter dream it three times. God did a similar thing with Cornelius and basically said send some men to go get Peter and bring him back to the house. **WOW!!** Who is the last person you'd ever willingly invite to your house? For Cornelius that would have

been Peter. Separated by religious and ethnic backgrounds basically they would have had nothing to do with each other. God was really pushing the envelope here with these two.

After a series of events Peter is at Cornelius's house and says to a group that's gathered "you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean". **DOUBLE WOW!!** This is the beginning of the early church, the beginning of God's plan that the work of Christ was meant for everyone, not just the Jewish people who considered everyone else "unclean". But God had to work to break down some barriers between unlikely groups of people. The story continues and the Bible says "Peter began to speak: I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

Here's the deal: I've never met a Christian who didn't say God loves everybody or that we're supposed to love everybody, that everyone is a person of dignity etc. etc. You know the verse from John 3:16 "For God so loved the world..." And as much as we try to live that out the truth is doesn't always work out that way. While the Biblical message was and is that those outside the covenant could now be included we sometimes have a hard time wanting those who are different or who think differently than us to be included.

Whether we want to admit it or not we all have a core set of beliefs that cause us to act the way we do. And sometimes they're hard to admit. But just like with Peter and Cornelius God wants to push our envelope.

A lot is being made these days about divisions within our country and while very real they aren't new. There have always been divisions at school around cliques. There have always been divisions of economic class and which class deserves what. There have always been divisions of race, political affiliation, human sexuality, immigration, and more

There are divisions between churches and within churches over issues like baptism, communion, how one is saved, how to read The Bible, Church governance, speaking in tongues, the authority of Scripture and the list is endless. And all of these divisions ultimately work to keep us separated and in our own group—however those groups are defined. But what really happens when God puts a person or group of people in our life who either look or think differently than we do?

Prior to coming to Servant of Christ I served a church in the Bay Area. It was for the most part a middle class town and for the most part a middle class church.

There was a guy named Rob who started hanging around the church. He was for lack of a better term... kind of part-time homeless. The men in the church had a standing mission trip to a place called Rancho Santa Marta in Mexico. Rancho Santa Marta is an amazing ministry in the middle of nowhere about three hours south of the border. Rancho Santa Marta is a non-denominational Christian mission that houses about 50 children, some of whom are orphans, other for whom their very poor parents can't afford them. They also have a school of around 200 kids many of whom have special needs from the surrounding area. As I said an amazing place.

It was a small group of guys seeking to put their faith in action. Well Rob caught wind that there was a group going on the trip. And if I'm 100% honest with you none of us really wanted him to go on the trip because the five of us were friends and Rob was a really high maintenance kind of guy, let's just say he had issues. Again to be totally honest, we all believed God loved him, but none of us really wanted to love him enough to have him go on the trip. We were all trying to be "nice" and eventually he came on the trip. It became evident about a half hour into the trip that it was going to be a very different trip than the one we all wanted.

Rob was kind of a pain in the neck, we had to change a lot of our plans to accommodate some of his issues and I'm embarrassed to say we were all glad when it was over. It turns out our mission trip in the end had very little to do with

the sheet rock we hung, and the tile we laid, any group could have done the things we did.

Instead the real mission of the trip turned out to be bringing Rob into this group, a group where we all could say “God loves everybody” but who were resisting loving Rob. He told us his stories about his background, drug use, mental health issues and more. A lot of things most of us were unfamiliar with. It’s a great understatement that God pushed our envelope and not just a little. That God enlightened us to not call anything or anyone unclean who God calls clean.

Oh sure we all believed God loved Rob but what we really came to see was that for that week God called us to love Rob in ways that were uncomfortable and stretched us a lot. Oh I know most if not all of us here this morning would agree that God loves everybody. But who are the individuals or groups of people you might think are “unclean” or who have no chance of being included in God’s kingdom. Who is that individual or group of people who are really sure “have it all wrong” when it comes to things like politics, race, human sexuality, immigration, taxation or political party affiliation? Who is the person or group of people that when it comes to faith seem either really shallow or really off the deep end, or with whom you are total disagreement about matters of faith.

I invite you to consider God's words to Peter this morning "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean". And as you consider those words to you about others may they also consider those words about you. And May God push each of our envelopes and know that it's possible that no one is outside of the love and mercy of God.

May God bless you, those you love and those you have a hard time loving.  
In Jesus name Amen!