

Scripture Reading:

Acts 10:1 "There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" 4 And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. 6 He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." 7 And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. 8 So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa. 9 The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. 10 Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance 11 and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13 And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." 15 And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." 16 This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. 17 Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. 18 And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. 19 While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. 20 Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.""

"Peter Learns a Hard Lesson"

Last week we made the case that in part Luke gave us details of Peter's travels so we could see how the Holy Spirit was preparing him to come to Caesarea where he would be God's instrument as the one to first preach the Good News to the Gentiles.

- He will preach to a Roman Centurion named Cornelius along with his family and friends.

We will consider Cornelius in more detail next week and if you would like some interesting pre-homework, look up the various centurions we find mentioned in the New Testament and see how they are presented: *Interesting indeed*. But this, week we will once again focus on Peter:

- Because before He can bring Peter to Caesarea, God must first teach Peter a tough lesson.

As we study Peter's lesson, it can serve as an example of the ways God helps us to learn as well:

- God often uses very graphic images to make His points
- God is very patient with us
- God often plants seeds of truth that we consider over time

And in the end...

- God commands our obedience!

Before we consider what happened to Peter during his stay at Simon the Tanner's home, we should ask: Why Peter & not Paul? Jesus has made it clear that Saul of Tarsus will become Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. Why is it Peter who first brings the Gospel to the Gentiles?

- **Is it because he is the head of the Church as the Roman Catholics would teach?**
- **Was he a better preacher than Paul?**
- **Was it because Peter was closer to Caesarea than Saul was now?**

While someone could argue that any of these was possible, none of them have any Scriptural merit.

- **The very reason that Luke could put together his orderly account of all that was accomplished was because God did things in an orderly way.**

Luke tells us at the beginning of Acts that his Gospel had taught what "Jesus began to do and teach" until the day of His ascension.

- **The Book of Acts is now the story of how the Kingdom of Jesus is going to advance and fill the earth.**

It begins with Jesus telling His disciples to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, all of Judea and Samaria and then to the ends of the earth.

- **They were to proclaim the Good News that Jesus had come to save His people from their sins...**
- **That the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Church for power and comfort...**
- **And that this Church, the Bride of Jesus would take His Kingdom, the new creation, to all the corners of the world.**

As we have discussed in previous messages, this included three groups that did not get along... AT ALL The Jews, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles. And yet, God's plan was for all of them to be part of the New Creation, all were to be part of the Church! So, what we saw at Pentecost when the Spirit came in power with the Jews in Jerusalem is repeated with both the Samaritans and the Gentiles so there could be no doubts about what the Spirit was doing. Hence, the reason that we have Peter present at all three events:

- **Peter & the eleven preached the message of salvation at Pentecost to the Jews in Jerusalem**
- **Peter & John brought the Holy Spirit to the Saints in Samaria**
- **And now, Peter will be God's instrument to first preach the Gospel to the Gentiles and to witness how the Holy Spirit was poured out on them just as He had been with the Jews & Samaritans.**

This is an important moment in Church history: The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians who struggled as a divided church that we Saints have the ministry of reconciliation. In writing to the Galatians who clung to the old Jewish ways, Paul explained what it meant for the Gospel to go not only to the Jews but to the Samaritans and Gentiles as well:

"The Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

- Now we all read this from the Gentile side of the equation and celebrate these great truths

We must remember that it was not so easy for the Jews to see and thus Peter has to learn a very hard lesson: A lesson about the Law and about Grace as Paul explained to the Church at Galatia.

- So let's consider how God taught Peter this important lesson!

While staying at Simon the Tanner's house, Peter goes up on the roof for a time of prayer around noon. Last week we saw Peter on his knees seeking God's guidance on what to do about Tabitha and now we see him taking a regular time to pray, again in a quiet place:

- I hope we all see a pattern here: One we should be more diligent to bring into our lives as well.

As He often does, God uses something very common to get Peter's attention and combines it with a dramatic vision.

- Peter is hungry and thus asks, or is waiting for some food to be prepared.
- Peter has food on his mind, even at his time of prayer!

So God gives Him a very disturbing vision about food: He sees heaven opened and a large sheet descends with all the animals and birds of the air. *[explain how the sheet would work]*

Then a voice says to this hungry man: “Rise Peter, kill and eat!” Peter, as he has done in the past, says, “not so Lord!” *[would we?]* Peter did not want to hear the talk about Jesus dying & said, ‘this shall not happen’ & was strongly rebuked Peter did not want to have Jesus wash his feet, and then overreacted to the mild rebuke that Jesus gave

- Here Peter again says, Not so Lord and explains why he is taking this position:

He perceives that the voice is suggesting that he partake of unclean animals or even clean animals that had come in contact with unclean animals, a prohibition that the Jews had added to God's Law. Peter thinks he is on pretty solid ground this time, which is why this is such a hard lesson for him to learn.

- So God is patient, giving the vision not once, but three times
- In doing so, God plants a seed that Peter is then left to ponder as he tries to understand what the vision meant

And finally the Spirit speaks plainly to Peter when it comes time for him to obey by going with these Gentiles. This vision is clearly a message from God, coming down out of heaven. It is so important that Luke gives us two complete accounts of the vision

To properly understand it we must again look to the Old Testament. The first point of confusion, especially to our modern way of thinking, is just what did Peter see?

- Now remember this is a vision, so it could be big and bold, like some of those dreams in the movie Inception.

We should not think that Peter is seeing a little sheet come down with a few animals that could fit on the roof of Simon's house.

- On the other hand, we do not need to have something so large that every single species of animal and bird on the planet even in Peter's day would fit in it.

Now don't get me wrong, I do believe the text means what it says when Luke tells us that "in it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts creeping things and birds of the air."

The Old Testament image that should come to mind is the Ark that Noah built. His ark was able to hold two of every kind of animal and bird. *[Interesting: No fish in the boat or the sheet]*

You see in some ways, we Christians are the real evolutionists, if by evolution you mean changes that bring diversity within the kinds of animals that God created: Or micro-evolution as it would be called today. For example, today there are over 1,000 different breeds of dogs: The secularist evolutionist would argue they all descended from a pair of wolves starting ten to fifteen thousand years ago: We would argue they all descended from the pair of dogs that Noah took on the Ark just five thousand years ago, so who is the better evolutionist? BUT, I hope that you get the point: Peter is looking at the animal kingdom & being told to kill & eat:

- This shocks him because of what he believes about the Law of God and some additions as well

God's Law declared some animals to be clean and others as unclean and that God's chosen people were to demonstrate their holiness by only eating clean animals. This was based on the characteristics of the animals and not IF they had been around other unclean animals which is a prohibition the Jews had added to the Law with their legalism.

Just as Eve added to the Lord's command in the garden, when God said eat only these clean animals, the Jews said eat only these clean animals IF they have not touched any of the unclean animals. So, now that we see why Peter reacted as he did: What is the lesson that God is trying to teach Peter? Now many will argue that this is where God clearly tells us the food laws in the Old Testament no longer apply. They don't, but I don't think it is because of this vision:

- The food laws were given to picture holiness and the problem of sin: Both have been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus who died for the sins of His people as the sinless Son of God!

It is sad how many arguments there have been about these food laws and yet it is hard to get a simple answer to the question of why some animals were clean and others unclean. You certainly will get no help from the commentaries which just ignore the whole controversy! But if we do ask, some will argue that it was for health reasons and thus we should continue to follow these recommendations.

Some argue that it is just arbitrary so God could use this obedience as an example for His people. Some thought it symbolized the difference between the Jew and Gentile, one being clean and the other unclean, and this was certainly prevalent in Peter's time and a big part of his problem. I would like to submit that almost all of this is just plain wrong: The division among clean and unclean was to remind us about our fall into sin: Think about the two major results of the fall...

- Death enters the good creation & the ground is cursed.

I know Leviticus may not be your favorite book, but if you think about these two things the next time you read through these laws, many of these details will make more sense. Jesus came to save His people from their sins & God's Law shows how BIG a problem sin was and how Jesus was going to take it away. The clean animals were those who had cloven hooves and chewed the cud, both of which gave them some distance from the cursed ground. The others walked directly on the ground having more contact with the curse.

The unclean birds were mostly scavengers who had constant contact with death

- Hence in both cases we have the unclean animals and birds in contact with the curse and death.

This is why God's people were to avoid them to demonstrate that they were a holy people, set apart for God. Not holy because they only eat clean animals, but holy because God would remove their sins as He promised! Now that Jesus has come, all who have repented and turned to Him for the forgiveness of sin are made clean: Jew... Samaritan... or Gentile

- All are now righteous in the eyes of God because He sees them only through the perfect righteousness of His Beloved Son!

Hence in the new creation God could say to Peter, rise kill and eat. We no longer demonstrate our righteousness by what we eat or by the blood of bulls and goats: We show the world that we are righteous by preaching the Good News that sins are forgiven in Jesus and living according to His commands! Peter must not call common those people whom God has cleansed.

Of course this was a hard lesson for Peter: It was one he would struggle with his entire life, like when he pulled away from fellowship meals with the Gentiles after other Jews came to Antioch.

But, God was patient:

- God showed the vision THREE times to make sure Peter grasped what He was saying.
- God let Peter ponder what the meaning was...
- And finally God commanded Peter to obey

The result will be the conversion of the first Gentiles which begins the final phase of the Great Commission! So what are the lessons for us to learn?

- Where is God trying to get our attention today, even if it is not through visions?

As we saw with miracles last week, God could still give visions today if He chose, but Peter told the Saints in his final letter that we have something much better than visions or special days like the one Peter had on the Mount of Transfiguration where he saw Jesus in all His glory along with Moses and Elijah!

“And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 20 knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” II Peter 1:19-21

Peter does not tell us to look for visions or experiences for guidance, but rather to HEED this Book:

- God's revelation to us all.
- As we do, there will be many hard lessons for us to learn

And we have not only this vision of Peter's to ponder, but all of the great images that God gave us in His Word, from Cain slaying his brother down through all the parables & examples that Jesus used and ending with James and Revelation!

- God will teach us just as He did Peter at this important time:

-- We know that God will be patient...

-- God will plant seeds of truth that will grow in our lives if we are faithful in our study of His Word

-- And when we are ready, God will command us to follow what we know to be true and we should willingly go where God takes us as Peter did.

➤ **What are some of those lessons?**

In prior weeks we have discussed Church unity and that is certainly an issue in the American Church where our thinking is often at odds with what is clearly taught in the Scriptures. We should certainly strive to learn the lessons God would teach us in this important area!

Another area of concern for our lives is how we also call common or unclean, things that God considers holy just as Peter did three times: We are not content with what we have or what we are called to do and we do not live life to the fullness that Jesus calls us to because we have added rules to God's Word and divided life's tasks into the very Unbiblical categories of spiritual and secular.

In closing, allow me to use one example of where I think we have learned some lessons here at Church of the King to illustrate what I mean:

➤ **In a moment we will gather at the Lord's Table as He has commanded us.**

We have come from many different church backgrounds and over the years many of us have participated in Communion in different ways. I think we are all pretty united in our basic understanding today, though we know that we must continue to study God's Word and to grow in our understanding of one of the greatest mysteries we experience. I hope that part of the reason we know that we should grow in the future is that we can reflect on how far some of us have come in the past!

Here at Church of the King we practice Communion on a weekly basis. It was not so in most of the churches that we came from and yet now I do not think it is something we would want to give up. It should remind us not to be as judgmental as we so easily are sometimes if we remember that we once had good reasons for monthly or even quarterly participation: At least it seemed so at the time...

-- We knew that Catholic and Orthodox churches did weekly communion and we did not want to be like them: Going to weekly communion would be a step in the wrong direction or so we thought.

-- Others argued that communion was to be special and that doing it too often would make it common!

-- And finally, as good reformers we wanted the Word to be central in our worship and weekly communion might distract from that.

I hope that we can all agree that over the past six years, we have kept the Word central, communion has grown more special not less and we certainly will not be joining Rome or Constantinople any time soon!

We use good bread and real wine at the Table because we believe it was what was commanded and represents the best from all the powerful of the images we given to us in the Scriptures to ponder.

Here is an area where we must be so careful not to look down on those who do not, even if we think they are very wrong... They do have their reasons, even if it might only be to say that is how it has always been done at our church.

We must trust that God will bring them along in His good time in the same way that He taught Peter...

As Pastor Wilson likes to say,

"It is amazing how God will take five years to teach me some simple truth and then I turn around and want my brother to get it in fifteen minutes!"

And finally, when we gather at this Table, we will gather all the Saints who are with us this morning including our covenant children! For those of us coming from other church backgrounds, this was perhaps one of the hardest lessons for us to learn, so again we must be gracious with others.

We must also remember that while these truths came to us over time and in some cases as something very different than what we practiced before, we are now raising many covenant children who will know no other way of celebrating the Table

Our obligation to them is to be sure they understand why others do different things and teach them to also be patient with those other Saints.

- **And we must remember that God is not through with us, especially in areas where we think we have arrived!**

We think we have come a long way in our understanding of the Table, but it should remind us of how far we may yet have to go!

There is always more to learn about a mystery and we are certainly not settled on how access to the Table should be handled with those who may be in need of discipline.

- **These & many other questions we must bring continually before our gracious God in prayer and study of His Word!**

Our confidence in all of this should come from our knowledge that we serve a great God who loves us!

We should be excited about all that He can teach us, the images and pictures that He can use to teach us!

We should marvel at how patient God is with us!

- **We must remember to water those seeds of truth He has already planted in our minds and hearts.**

And of course in this season of ordinary time...

- **We must remember to always stand ready to obey His commands!**

Communion Meditation: I Corinthians 10:

“1 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, 2 all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ....

[warning about Lusting after things; idolatry; immorality]

11 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”