

“Open Wide”

Introduction: Imagine, for a moment, that you are sitting at your favorite coffee shop, or watering hole, pondering the difficult and challenging state of the world. As you ponder, you are moved to grab a napkin, pull out a pen, and begin to jot down on that napkin all the names, and/or the kinds of people you really have a problem with. Your list may include neighbors or co-workers, people of a different political party or social status, people of a different marital status or sexual orientation or gender, people of a different color or religion or nationality, and people who have hurt you in some way. As you write down these names, though you might not say it out loud, you might well be thinking to yourself that the world would be a lot better off without these folks, of whom you cannot think well of, speak well of, nor hope well of, and can't even begin to try. And then imagine that you hear the voice of Jesus saying, “To all of these people I want the doors of my church, and of your heart, to be open.”

If your first response is, “Surely not, Lord!” then you can begin to feel what Peter might have felt in the midst of the vision God gave him while he was praying at the home of Simon the tanner in Joppa. Few walls of pride and prejudice were higher than that which existed between Jew and Gentile in the first century. If Peter was going to be a leader in the church of Jesus Christ, then God had some deep, heart-work to do in Peter to begin to break down these walls and pry open the bars of Peter's entrenched hatred. For, like a dentist who says to us “open wide” in order that she might be able to examine and bring healing to all of our teeth, in Jesus God says “open wide” to the doors of our churches and our hearts so that his healing grace might be made available to all kinds of people, whether we like them or not. As we reflect on the heart-work God does in Peter, we might be asking what heart-work God might need to do in us so that his grace might be extended to all.

I. Up on the Roof

A. In Acts 11, we see Peter being asked by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, to explain his radical and unseemly behavior. Peter, it had been reported, had shared a meal, a most intimate form of fellowship in the ancient world, with the uncircumcised, with Gentiles. In response, Peter gives a summary account of the remarkable events that had taken place in his life over the previous days, events that Luke has narrated for us in chapter 10. The fact that Luke tells us about these events twice (chs. 10 and 11), combined with the fact that this is by far the longest narrative in Acts, highlights the importance of this pivotal event in the life of the church.

B. It all began when Peter went up on the roof of the house where he was staying in Joppa to pray. Recall from last week that Joppa was the coastal town some 10 miles north of Lydda (near modern Tel Aviv), where Jesus had worked a miracle through Peter, restoring a woman named Tabitha from death to life. That had happened after Jesus had worked through Peter to put a paralyzed man back on his feet in the town of Lydda. Worth noting is that both of those towns were predominantly Gentile in composition, and, while the healings were of Jews, Peter would have begun to see God's resurrection power at work outside of Jewish territory. In addition, somehow Peter had taken rooms in the house of a tanner (10:43), an occupation that worked with dead animals which a good Jew would stay far away from due to the fact that contact with such an animal would make him ceremonially unclean. Could staying with this tanner, giving Peter the opportunity to come to know a Gentile as a person, instead of a group to fear, been an additional way God had begun to soften Peter's heart?

C. Now, let's think a bit more about this issue of clean and unclean, for, as Peter was praying, God continued to break open his heart by giving him a vision of a large sheet on which were various animals, all of which God invited Peter to kill and eat, including the unclean ones. However, a good Jew would not have done so and would in fact have been horrified at this instruction, as Peter clearly was. The issue of clean and unclean had been built into the relationship between God and his people since the early days of their formation. In his wisdom, God had determined to heal the world of its brokenness by initially working through one particular family – that of Abraham and Sarah – and then the one nation that grew out of their descendants, that of Israel. By choosing and blessing one family, God intended to bless all the families of the earth (Ge. 12:1-4). To remind his people of his holiness, as well as the holiness that he had called them to, God had instituted a number of food restrictions, along with special days like the sabbath and rites like circumcision. All of these were intended to help protect God's people from being sucked into the pagan culture around them, and to maintain their unique calling, so that through them, the light of God might shine on those around them.

D. It is, of course, a huge challenge, to “live in the world but not of it,” as it is sometimes put. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, the Israelites twisted God's gracious choice of them as his servants into one of favoritism and nationalism. Boundaries meant to distinguish and protect became boundaries used to exclude. The Israelites became filled with racial pride and even hatred toward the Gentiles and came up with all sorts of ways to avoid being in their presence. No orthodox Jew would dream of entering the home of a Gentile, and certainly would not sit down at the same table to eat. But here was Peter, now being told by God to forget about the clean/unclean distinction and to eat whatever he wanted. Peter was shocked! Of course, it wasn't ultimately about what was on the menu that concerned God. God was concerned about the names on the napkin, about who his hospitality should be extended to. As Jesus had taught, with his arrival, the one through whom God's blessing was going to come to the world was here; the time for dietary distinctions was done (Mk. 7:14-23).

II. Down in a Home

A. While God was working on prying open Peter's heart in Joppa, God was also working 30 miles further up the coast in the city of Caesarea on a Roman soldier named Cornelius (“the man” in v. 12). Cornelius, we learn in chapter 10, was a good guy and an honest spiritual seeker. But he knew nothing about Jesus, or the forgiveness of sin and new life that comes through him. So God came to Cornelius in a vision as well. In his vision, an angel told Cornelius to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Peter and bring him back, for Peter had an important message concerning salvation for Cornelius and his household. As Peter was praying and pondering his vision, the three men from Cornelius arrived, and the Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them.

(I must admit that when reading these accounts, I get this funny picture in my mind of God running up and down the coast between these two guys saying, “Do I have to do all the work here?!” And the answer is yes, pretty much, because this Jew Gentile wall had become so incredibly thick and huge that it would take the power and the initiative of the One who had leapt over the boundary between death and life to help his people leap over the boundary that had arisen between Jew and Gentile.)

B. To Peter's credit, remarkably he invited these men into his home to spend the night in preparation for the next day's journey. Gentiles and Jews simply didn't share hospitality in this way but Peter evidently had begun to think that God was up to something. And unlike Jonah, who in Joppa had tried to sail away from ministering to Gentiles, the next day Peter followed the promptings of the Spirit

and went with the men to Caesarea. Not only that, but when he got there, and Cornelius invited him into his house, he went in! Peter was breaking every law in the Jewish book. And when Cornelius had shared with Peter what had happened in his own prayer time, Peter shared with the Gentiles who had gathered there the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the forgiveness and new life that he brings. In what is sometimes referred to as the Gentile Pentecost, while Peter was speaking, it became obvious that the Holy Spirit had come upon these Gentiles, God himself was dwelling within them, affirming the faith in Christ that they now had and the repentance that it had led them to want to live out. Peter knew that with such a movement of God, there was no way they could be excluded from God's family.

C. Out in the Church

A. So, while Cornelius became the first Gentile convert, Peter underwent a conversion of his own, a conversion that would lead the church toward becoming a multi-racial, multi-cultural society that God had always intended. But just how hard this is for us to live out was soon evidenced by Peter himself who, if you read Galatians 2, had a little while later stopped eating with Gentiles. This was due, Paul writes, to his fear of what other powerful leaders would think and say, as well, most likely, to bits of prejudice that still lingered. It all led Paul to have some strong words for Peter, including charging him with hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-14), and reminding his readers in Galatia that Gentiles did not need to become like Jews, they didn't need to take on the Jewish traditions to become a part of the church because if they are in Christ, they are all one; all are Abraham's heirs, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (3:26-29).

B. All of which should lead us to ask, where might bits of prejudice linger in us? For, unfortunately, that ugly sin still lingers in the church in the form of racism, sexism, and nationalism, just to name a few. Where, to ask the question a different way, are we more concerned with people being like us, instead of becoming like Jesus?

Illustration: I think of Mahatma Gandhi sharing in his autobiography that in his student days in England, he was deeply touched by reading through the gospels and seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity, for it seemed to offer a real solution to the caste system that plagued the people of India. So, one day, he went to a church to experience what it was all about and to hopefully meet with the minister and ask some of his questions. But when he arrived, the ushers refused to give him a seat, suggesting instead that he go elsewhere to worship with his own people! He left and never came back concluding, "If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu!"

In this spirit, a pastor named Kent Hughes offers the following adaptation of an Edwin Markham poem:

Some draw a circle that shuts others out; race and position are what they flout.

But Christ in love seeks them all to win; He draws a circle that takes them in!

May the experience of Peter and Cornelius and Gandhi help us to draw a circle that invites others in, that keeps our doors open wide to sharing the grace of God with whoever walks into our church, or into our lives.