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The Acts of the Apostles
XIV. God Shows No Partiality
Acts 10:1-48

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Maybe it is different today, but I remember it beginning back in middle school – the cliques, that is. The great dividing up of the early adolescent universe into those who were “in” and those who were “out.” The joy of belonging or the agony of not belonging or just simply the angst of struggling to find some circle, some group, with whom one could belong. Who gets invited to the party and who does not – on such small matters, the whole universe seemed to stand or fall. All those invisible, yet nonetheless impenetrable boundaries that sprung up seemingly overnight between inclusion and exclusion – and the genuine and deep hurt done to the souls of those who found themselves on the wrong side, the “out” side. All of it, in a sense, so pointless and silly – and yet, at the same time, in that moment so vital to our sense of self and well-being.

And the really rotten thing is that it doesn’t stop when we leave middle school. In fact, it only intensifies. Even in adulthood, even in middle age, even in old age still we can find ourselves confronted by those same silly games of who is in and who is out, inclusion and exclusion. Still we can find our hearts anxious over our social status and belonging. I don’t know what the equivalent of middle school is in the British educational system, but C. S. Lewis clearly went through all of this in his day. In fact, he writes about this game of inclusion and exclusion in one of his most unusual and provocative essays, entitled “The Inner Ring”:

I believe that in all men’s lives at certain periods, and in many men’s lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside . . . This desire is one of the great permanent mainsprings of human action. It is one of the factors which go to make up the world as we know it – this whole pell-mell of struggle, competition, confusion, graft, disappointment, and advertisement, and if it is one of the permanent mainsprings, then you may be quite sure of this. Unless you take measures to prevent it, this desire is going to be one of the chief motives of your life . . . until the day when you are too old to care.¹

Peer pressure, cliques, inner rings, inner circles. You would think we would outgrow such things. But we silly, sinful, insecure human beings never seem to do so. Unless, of course, Someone from outside our silly, sinful, insecure human existence should happen to intervene. Unless, of course, Someone shall come along who despises our games of inclusion and exclusion

and who confronts us about them. Unless, of course, Someone – a divine Someone – should come into this world and show us the better way, demand of us that we tear down these foolish walls – in other words, convert us. Which is precisely what has happened in the coming of Jesus Christ. And which is precisely what our Scripture this morning is all about. This is a conversion story. But the one being converted is not so much the outsider, Cornelius, as it is the insider, Peter, the disciple of Jesus.

Let me explain. When God first revealed His great plan of salvation to Abraham back in Genesis 12, the plan had two stages.² First, God would bless Abraham and his descendants – who, in time, became known as Israel, the Jewish people. God would enter into special relationship with them – they would be his “chosen” people and He would be to them their “close-at-hand” God. But all of this was only in preparation for the real focus of the plan of salvation, stage two. The second stage of the plan was that, having so blessed this one people, the descendants of Abraham – Israel, the Jews – God would then, at the right time, inaugurate the universal portion of His plan from out of Israel. God would, at the right time, reach out through this one people, Israel, in order to bring His blessing of salvation to all the peoples of the earth. So God, in the Old Testament, the old Covenant, enters into special relationship with one people, the Jews, in order that at the right time He might bring about right relationship between Himself and all the other peoples on earth – collectively referred to as the “Gentiles.” And that is the New Testament story, the new Covenant. At the right time Jesus Christ, born of the people Israel, comes forth to redeem all peoples.

But there was a problem. By the time of Jesus, Israel had more or less forgotten about stage two of the plan – they had gotten quite comfortable with being the favored nation of stage one, the “insiders” compared to a whole world of “outsiders.” In fact, they had begun to see themselves as the only people of God – having quite forgotten all about stage two of God’s salvation plan. And, in general, they had begun to see the rest of the peoples on earth, the Gentiles, as being not only unimportant to God, but as being unclean, untouchable, far from God and to be avoided at all costs in their daily lives. They could not imagine that God might possibly love the Gentiles – and certainly could not imagine a scenario in which God might love those unclean Gentiles just as much as He loved them. That old game of insiders and outsiders, the included and the excluded, played out on a universal scale, even a cosmic scale.

And so, when Jesus came along and began eating with all the wrong people, showing kindness and interest and mercy to outsiders; when Jesus went so far as to offer healing and salvation to people like that Samaritan woman at the well³ – well, the Jews did not know what to make of it. Well, they did know what to make it – they rejected it, and then they rejected Him. In fact, it was this aspect of Jesus’ ministry that served as a major reason for why Jesus was killed – because He just kept on coloring outside the lines of what the Jews knew to be clean and unclean, “us” versus “them,” insiders over and against all those outsiders.

And this same issue was present even in the early church – even after Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead. Remember that at this stage, the stage of our story this morning, the church was almost universally still a Jewish phenomenon – Jewish converts to Jesus. Now, earlier in Acts, we have heard Jesus say to His disciples, before His ascension, that they were to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth⁴ – but clearly the church had not yet reckoned with what exactly that meant or was going to mean for them. I mean, Jerusalem

and Judea, of course – that was Jewish country. But Samaria, the ends of the earth – the places where all the Gentiles lived? There had been hints already of what this going out was going to mean, but they had been small, isolated, and readily overlooked – like the conversion of a few Samaritans through Philip, as well as Philip’s desert encounter with that solitary Ethiopian eunuch.⁵ But all of this was just about to change – and in a big way.

And the great turning point in the church’s mission and understanding of that mission is our story this morning – this conversion story. This story marks the moment when the Jewish Christians of the early church finally began to grasp just what it is that Jesus is intending – that Jesus really is intending to fulfill stage two of the plan of salvation, where the salvation of God goes out beyond the descendants of Abraham to all the peoples on earth. That Jesus really does intend for them, His first disciples, to take the Gospel of salvation in Jesus to the literal ends of the earth. And that, most revolutionary of all, that Jesus really does so love this world, all of it – and really does expect His disciples to reach out in love to this world, all of it, in His name. No more insiders and outsiders, no more clean and unclean, no more Jew and Gentile – because in Jesus all are welcome, in Jesus all are included, in Jesus all are being made one.

And that’s how we find Peter, the head of the early church, having such a strange vision upon the rooftop of Simon the tanner’s house in the city of Joppa. Peter is hungry. And, in a trance, three times he sees a great blanket lowered from heaven with every type of animal, reptile, and bird upon it. And a voice from heaven saying, *“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”* Peter refuses – the Old Testament dietary laws of Leviticus 11 explicitly state that some of those creatures were not to be eaten by Jews – that they were to be considered unclean. Peter answers, *“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”* And the voice from heaven answers back: *“What God has made clean, do not call common or unclean.”* All of which makes no sense to Peter. *“Rise and eat . . . What God has made clean”* – what in the world could that mean?

And just then the doorbell rings in the house below. A delegation has arrived from a God-fearing Roman centurion named Cornelius – who has had his own vision from God, in which he has been told to send for Peter to come to his home in Caesarea. Now, understand – a Roman centurion, living in Caesarea – Caesar town – is pretty much the worst-case sort of Gentile in Peter’s Jewish Christian eyes. A Gentile, but also a part of the very empire that was currently oppressing the Jewish people – a member of the very occupying army which had been used to put Jesus to death. Gentile in capital letters and underlined. Outsider and unclean followed by six exclamation points! But the Spirit tells Peter to go with these men – and to Peter’s great credit, he obeys.

And that’s when it happens. Peter enters Cornelius’ house in Caesarea – and almost immediately we begin to see the tumblers beginning to click into place in Peter’s heart and mind – the meaning of that strange vision slowly becoming clear. He greets Cornelius by remarking how inappropriate it is for him to be in the house of a Gentile. But then, the first signs of this dawning new understanding: *“But God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”* Which gives Cornelius the opening to tell the story of his own visitation by the Holy Spirit, a story which astounds Peter – God speaking in a vision to a Gentile?!

Which then leads to the breakthrough, the great insight – not just for Peter, but for the whole church, opening the way for the church’s mission truly to begin going out to the ends of the earth. Peter exclaims, with what had to be something like genuine amazement, as at last it becomes completely clear to him what his vision meant: *“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* Which sounds a whole lot like something Jesus Himself had said: *“For God so love the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*⁶

So Peter then tells Cornelius the Gospel story about the death and resurrection of Jesus – the Gospel of salvation. And as he is doing so, the ultimate confirmation of what is occurring is given: the Holy Spirit falls upon everyone in the room, Jew and Gentile alike. Peter, in joy, exclaims, *“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”* And with that, the dividing lines between insider and outsider, Jew and Gentile, included and excluded, clean and unclean come tumbling down like the walls of Jericho – are torn down, once and for all, by Jesus Christ, the Savior of the nations. The One who has come to make all people one in the grace, mercy, and love of our common Father in heaven.

“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality . . .” So, how do our little, middle-school into adulthood games of who’s in and who’s out look now? All those boundaries we are ever eager to mark off between those who are “us” and those who are “them” – how do they look now in light of what God has done in Jesus, of what God is doing still through the Holy Spirit? Those lines we draw, those dividing walls we devise, our own little lists of who is clean and who is unclean, of whom we will associate with and of whom we will avoid at all costs – how does any of that look when lifted up into the light of heaven, into the arena of this all-embracing love of our heavenly Father, in the face of the all-seeking, all-welcoming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? *“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down,”* wrote the poet Robert Frost – and that something, actually Someone, is our Maker, Redeemer, and Friend.⁷

And so, therefore, where do you and I, like Peter before us, need to be converted in how we see others, in how we see this whole wide world of others? *“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* Or as Paul, who will soon see becoming the great missionary to the Gentile world, to the ends of the earth – as Paul will put it in his letter to the Ephesians: *“For He himself is our peace, who has made us [all] one.”*⁸ Middle-school is now and eternally over – because in Christ all are invited in, all are welcomed in, all are being made one. Our God shows no partiality.

We have said this is a conversion story, and primarily the story of Peter’s conversion – and rightly so. But, before closing, let us think of what all of this must have meant to Cornelius, the outsider – for it is his conversion story also. What must it have meant to him, in that moment, to be welcomed in by Peter – for that matter, to be included by the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to any of us – to the middle-school heart of anxiety and hurt and longing to belong which still lives inside of so many of us – what does it mean to us to realize that we also are included in the love of God, that we also are perceived as valuable, even precious, in the sight of the Most High, that Jesus Christ wants us also to belong to Him? To know that we are no longer rejected or excluded – but accepted. And accepted by the One whose acceptance matters most?

Paul Tillich, a prominent American theologian of the last century, puts it like this in one of his sermons:

*Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. **You are accepted**, accepted by that which is greater than you . . . **Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!**"*⁹

And then, having accepted our acceptance, that glorious gift of God's grace, let us then begin to pass it on to others – in Jerusalem, Judea, and in all Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.

¹ C. S. Lewis, "The Inner Ring," in The Weight of Glory (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 146, 151-152.

² Genesis 12:1-3.

³ John 4:1-42.

⁴ Acts 1:8.

⁵ Acts 8:1-8, 26-40.

⁶ John 3:16.

⁷ Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," in Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose, eds. Edward Conner Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), p. 16.

⁸ Ephesians 2:14.

⁹ Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," in The Shaking of the Foundations (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 161-162.