

April 24, 2016

TEXT: Acts 11:1–18

TITLE: The Other

“Now the apostles and the believers, who were in Judea, heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.* These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’*

“Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: ‘A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.’ This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.” (pg. 167)

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. penned those words in Chapter six of “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community in 1967.” Almost 50 years later, we have not learned how to live faithfully, in harmony and fidelity in God’s “great world house.” We are still looking at one another as *the other*, thinking *the other* less than, not connected spiritually or in any other way; not of the same family – the family of God. We hear the

division and contempt for *the other* espoused daily - in political ads and interviews and in the ugly, violent behavior exhibited at campaign rallies; in the refusal of the federal legislators to do their job in an attempt to sabotage the record of the president; in the callous way people with limited income are relegated to live in communities where schools are failing and there are few resources; and in the senseless acts of violence we hear of with the dawning of each new day, people taking *the other's* life, as if it has no value. Will we ever recognize that we are all the other endowed with the spirit of God?

Peter came to this realization quite dramatically. The Jewish followers in Jerusalem questioned Peter about his behavior in Joppa, cavorting with uncircumcised Gentiles, those who didn't follow Jewish traditions; the other presumed to be outside the circle of this new sect. Those questioning Peter were reviled by his behavior, eating at the table of a non-Jew, eating meat that was not ceremonially clean. Thanks be to God, Peter had become a wiser adherent and follower of the resurrected Christ. Rather than respond harshly or jump off the handle, Peter simply states the facts of his life changing, roof-top experience communing with God.

Peter repeats almost verbatim what occurred during his stay at Simon the tanner's home. How the spirit of God came to him in a vision and revealed, what God has made clean must not be profaned (Acts 10:15b). And how at the same time, men sent by Cornelius, a devout, faithful, and generous, Roman officer arrived and summoned Peter to accompany them.

Worlds of *the other* are about to collide as Peter accompanies the men to Cornelius' home and after breaking bread together, Peter begins to share the good news of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household. God gave them the same gift God gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, Peter says. God's revelation to Peter becomes real in an undeniable way and he states: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34).

We have all experienced partiality, and considered *the other* at some time:

- Native Americans, the indigenous inhabitants of this land, considered the other by the new settlers - brutally killed, land stolen from them, still suffering the consequences of that subjugation and theft today;
- People of African descent brought to this country as slaves, considered uneducated, animals, property, the other to be exploited and misused, still suffering the consequences discrimination and neo-racism today;

- People who are LGBTQ, considered by some as unloved by God, still fighting for equality and the right to be recognized as a part of the family of God. The list is exhaustive, but unfortunately we don't have that much time!

Brothers and sisters, if the church in Acts had closed its doors to Gentiles, Christianity would have remained a sect within Judaism and would not have gone out into all nations as commanded by Christ. And so we are left to ponder: If God shows no partiality; if in Christ Jesus there is no Gentile or Jew, no male or female, no rich or poor – if God see no one as the other! Why do we?

If God so loved the world that Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save it, why do we place limits and qualifiers on the mission of God to redeem all of humanity? Every time we exclude someone from full participation in the redemptive work of God, shouldn't our souls be troubled?

Like Peter, we are called to lift our voices, sometimes forcefully, but always in love, to squarely face critics, to confront conflict, injustice and separation with facts that transform and enliven. To tell the stories that make real the love God has for all of God's people.

Just as we have welcomed new members and friends into fellowship today and will soon ordain and install new elders and deacons; the doors of the Church swing open and welcomes in *the other*, into a place where God takes our ordinary and does the extraordinary. The doors of the church also swing open to send us out into the world to share the stories of how those who traditionally have not had a seat at the table, those who have been harmed or wounded by religion, those characterized as *the other* know they too are loved, welcomed and filled with the spirit of God, a member of the family.

When it comes down to it, faith, is often our breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God; to keep asking ourselves: 'What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?'" (Willimon, William H. Interpretations – Acts, pp 98, 99) It took Peter three times to understand that God was doing a new thing, to no longer be tied to religious traditions and nationalism; to realize that he and we are all new creations in Christ Jesus. But ah, once Peter caught the vision, he was able to stand with authority and speak truth to power about God's new world order.

Brothers and sisters, **we** are the inheritors of the "great world house" of Jesus Christ, Dr. King wrote about and it is in this "great world house" **we** are all *the other*, and therefore all the same. There has been a paradigm shift in tradition and religiosity. The "great world house" is open to all *the others* who love the Lord, who in the words of Prince and Christ, the Prince of Peace said, "I will die for you!" The "great world house" is open to all the others who are called according to God's purpose and are transformed to newness of life. The "great world house" is open to all *the others* who are saved by

the sacrifice of Christ Jesus. So, open the doors of this “great world house” beloved, there are others who desire to enter in! Amen.