

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even* on the Gentiles (Acts 10:45).

Just my luck, I finally get to preach on Mother's Day and I get stuck with a text on circumcision. Not that circumcision can't be a fun topic; I'm sure if you're a mohel or someone who just likes to attend a bris, this could be rather exciting. But on Mother's day? For my last sermon before I get married? The lectionary better have a good reason for its selection.

Well, rest assured there is a good reason. And sit comfortably, for the text really has nothing to do with a scalpel and some foreskin, so neither will I. In fact, the only reason the word "circumcised" is used at all is to make a clear distinction between Jews (the circumcised believers<sup>1</sup>) and Gentiles (the uncircumcised, yet-to-be-witnessed-to folk).

Now you'll probably not remember that prior to when our text begins, the apostles (who were circumcised devout Jews themselves, mind you – the only difference that they accepted Jesus to be the Messiah) were only concerned with spreading the Word of the Lord exclusively to fellow Jews. The thought to preach to Hellenized Gentiles was rejected, or in the very least, suspected of suspiciousness. There was a predetermined bias against the Gentiles as they were seemingly synonymous with Rome and the pagan way. So preaching to them, well, it simply wasn't done. Thus, the faces of the apostles always mirrored the faces they preached to and nary was there inspiration to alter their stance.

But all of that changed when a man named Cornelius, a Gentile Roman centurion, stepped onto the scene. Apparently Cornelius was not a pagan like the majority of his cohort, but rather observant in a God-fearing Gentile sort-of-way, which at first seems somewhat paradoxical or at least a retcon<sup>2</sup> of Biblical proportions. Nevertheless, he is described as a man sympathetic to Judaism, and in one of his daily prayers to the Jewish God, he receives a vision that beckons him to send for the apostle Peter. And trusting in the vision, he orders a couple of his men to do just that.

Meanwhile, off in the strange land of Joppa, Peter is said to be sitting on his roof, which seems like an odd place to sit<sup>3</sup>, and there he too receives a vision from God and even goes into a trance. (A parable perhaps for the parents out there, don't let your kids sit on roofs, well unless you want them to go to Seminary, then maybe you should. Come to think of it, as a teen I used to lay out on my roof to sunbathe. Wait a second...).

In Peter's vision he is told and I quote, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat (10:13)," which is interesting, as I didn't realize Lord Voldemort<sup>4</sup> made it into the Bible. You see, people seem to think scripture is only strange in the Old Testament, well, what in Joppa<sup>5</sup> is going on here? "Get up, Peter, kill and eat"? How are we to interpret this? Well clearly God is not commanding Peter to go on a cannibalistic killing spree. Or so we hope. No, actually God is telling Peter that he can hunt certain animals and eat certain foods that were traditionally declared unclean. That specifically, Peter can partake in what was previously associated with unclean and uncircumcised people.

This, my friends, was a momentous evolutionary step forward from the God of the Old Testament, with all of his dietary conditions and rules of foreigner engagement. Here the evolved God is urging Peter and indeed God's own Word into the uncharted, beyond its former regulations, and into communion with those who had previously been segregated from holy partnership.

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent studies have demonstrated that not every Jew was classified by circumcision. Certain first century Jews that occupied more Hellenized areas were sometimes uncircumcised, yet nonetheless considered faithful. The text from Acts was either unaware or unconcerned with these particular Jews, and had in mind a direct correlation between circumcision and Jewish obedience (Barclay, John. *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*. University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Retcon: short for "RETroactive CONtinuity." A pop-culture word employed when writers add information to the backstory of an individual or world so to provide continuity with a revelation later conceived.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, it's not that odd. Sitting on one's roof was one of the more efficient ways to cool off.

<sup>4</sup> Lord Voldemort: "He-who-must-not-be-named," though I just did. The evil entity in the Harry Potter series.

<sup>5</sup> Joppa: the city in which Peter's vision occurred.

And thus encouraged by this evolved vision, Peter welcomes Cornelius' foreign men without a shred of contempt. When they finally get Peter off of his roof (which apparently takes some doing), he grants them lodging. He takes them in and even agrees to go back with them to Caesarea, a hotbed of uncircumcised Gentiles, where Cornelius is waiting for him. And can you believe this? When he gets there and meets Cornelius face to unrecognized face, he even goes as far as to shatter the dogma of his brethren by saying,

**"You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean (10:28)."**

Wow, what a greeting, huh? Maybe a tad bit heavy, but oh, how inspired. In fact, Peter was so inspired that he began preaching a sermon right there and then to him. Just imagine, next time you invite Cindy over for scotch she'll freestyle a sermon! That's what it was like; and they were so taken by Peter's words that they too fell into a trance of sorts. But then, even something more amazing happened! Peter's sermon was cut off. Interrupted before it finished. Wouldn't that be your dream come true? I could just say Amen, before the real Amen, and we could be done and out of here by 10:45. But that wouldn't give you the full picture, the entire landscape, the whole kit-and-caboodle as the kinder used to say. It would also deprive you of the best part – that which came after Peter's sermon was suspended in time...

Cornelius and his uncircumcised cohort broke into tongues. Tongues, I dare say! Now, I'm not necessarily a believer in such things but it sure makes for compelling drama, doesn't it? Regardless, they were so dramatically overtaken by Peter's sermon on the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, that they couldn't contain themselves. And more, neither could Peter or the rest of the circumcised believers who witnessed it. They were so inspired by the power of their other's testimony (their other whom they originally thought unclean and to be avoided) that they remarked, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have (10:47)?" And so they baptized them, and spent the evening with them, and thus joined in fellowship with them, Jew and Gentile, the chosen and the outcast, and united under the same banner of God's ecumenical grace.

This story then, for all of its bizarre twists and turns, should penetrate deep into our hearts this morning. For in the same manner that Peter was interrupted from his sermon, so too ought we from the pretty prayers we speak from our ivory towers of insulated faiths; faiths too often left unchallenged by uncomfortable yet undeniably rewarding interactions. For from the mouth of Christ himself, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12)." And not just your recognizable other, but your true other. Meaning the Gentile if you're the Jew, the Muslim if you're the Christian, the unclean if you're the clean, the poor if you're the rich, the black if you're the white, the republican if you're the democrat, the democrat if you're the republican, the employee if you're the boss, the sick if you're the healthy, the alien if you're the citizen, the old if you're the young, the young if you're the old, the gay if you're the straight, the gay if you're the straight.

As Soren Kierkegaard, the great Christian existentialist, once wrote, "Love is the expression of the one who loves, not of the one who is loved. Those who think they can love only the people they prefer do not love at all. Love discovers truths about individuals that others cannot see." Just the same, Christ tells us that we were appointed by him to bear fruit that will last, in the form of unconditional love for all who are around us. That without that love which is unbound by constraints, the very foundations of the Kingdom at hand will not last.

But in the graspable, tangible sense, this metaphor of a fruit that will last doesn't really compute, does it? For as we begrudgingly know, there is no fruit that will last forever. And so, we preserve fruit by putting it in the fridge, closed away for a time until we want to come back to it. But my friends, Christ compels us to do the exact opposite. Don't store away your faith he says, don't wait for the convenient time to benefit your brother or sister in need. Just as he has been the branch ever around us, he commands us to leave the fruit of our faith that is an extension of him out now and always, available and fresh for every possible occasion at every possible time. Indeed, we are charged by Christ to defrost the depths of our callings, which have too great a prepotency to grow cold and stale, and to enliven our souls by sharing the good news with others, the very gospel given within his ultimate commandment to love.

And so on this day, when we celebrate the love we have for our other in our mothers (biological, step and societal), let us also be commissioned to become Christ's newest apostles, doing our best to extend his ministry of peace, love and mercy to each and every one of our neighbors, irrespective of any irrational difference, irrespective of any predetermined bias. Thanks be to Christ. Amen.