

Inside Out, Acts 10:23b-35

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At about noon, as was his daily habit, Peter went up to the rooftop to pray. It was quiet up there, away from the noises of the children and the busyness of the household. It was cool up there too, a place where you could feel the fresh breeze. It was a good place to focus, to pray.

We used to have a rooftop where we could find a cool spot for a bit of alone time. That was when we lived on the east coast of Tanzania, in the city of Dar es Salaam. It was hot and humid there, but on the roof you could find a cool, refreshing breeze. I can identify with Peter. But I never went into a trance, like Peter did. I never had a vision.

Now, Peter as a good Jew, kept all the kosher laws. No shellfish, no pork, no dairy in the same meal with meat (that means no sausage and cheese pizza!) So when a sheet was lowered from heaven having all the wrong foods in it, he must have been surprised to hear a heavenly voice encouraging him to get up and eat. Peter protested: "No way, Lord! I've never touched food that is impure or unclean." And the voice responded, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Three times this happened, each time with the same response. As Peter was trying to figure it all out, visitors arrived from Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, asking Peter to come to his home. Now, like kosher rules, there were strict laws that forbade the association of Jews with Gentiles. A faithful Jew like Peter would never invite a Gentile into his home, nor would he darken the threshold of a Gentile's door. Such contact would make him unclean.

You see, all those kosher laws had been meant to help form a new people – God's own people – who would be set apart from the other nations (the Gentiles). The Jews were to be "holy," that is "set apart" – and as you know – that meant both set apart *from* and set apart *for*. They were to be different from the "others," following God's good and righteous ways. They had been given God's law, after all, something of which they were proud and in which they took great delight (just check out Psalm 119). But this *setting apart from* was for the purpose of becoming a "light to the Gentiles;" for the purpose of including them into God's holy people as well. This was the part that the Jews often forgot.

But Jesus had already begun to move them forward into God's purpose. Now that God's Son had come, the kosher laws were no longer needed. God's ways were still as important as ever, but now a new way of *being* his people had come into play – not by simply keeping the letter of the law, but by being restored into right relationship with him through Jesus' death on the

cross. Love, Jesus had explained, is better than law. Law demands only the lowest bar of decency in society. Love transforms you with the highest. Love goes the distance.

Jesus had already turned their world upside down. Already his followers had grasped the Gospel of salvation – the good news that our relationship with God comes from his grace-filled forgiveness, not by our dutiful keeping of the law. Already this good news had shaken up their world and they had become dedicated preachers of the Gospel wherever they went. Already the Gentile world had gotten wind of the notion that this good news was not just for Jews, but for Gentiles too! But the Jews still needed some shaking up in their own heads. Jesus had turned their world upside down. Now -- the Holy Spirit was about to turn it inside out. As Jeremiah had said, the law of stone was about to be replaced by the law of love. Outsiders were about to become insiders.

Insiders. Outsiders. How well we know those concepts! Anyone who has ever been a teenager knows these categories well. If I were to ask you now, have you ever been on the outside, looking in? I have an idea that every hand would go up. If I were to ask you, have you ever been an insider and turned a cold shoulder on an outsider? my guess is that not as many hands would go up. But inside, you'd be saying, "Yeah, I guess I've been there too." It's a shameful admission. As Jesus' followers, it's hard to admit that you and I have been on the inside, and treated an outsider shamefully.

I think I must have been in 6th or 7th grade at the time, and I was not popular. I was a studious kid, and that didn't help. I also wore glasses, and felt I'd never get over that stigma. And to be honest, I really didn't like what the popular kids did: gossiping and cussing and doing things that made me feel uncomfortable. But oh, it was lonely on the outside! And I so wanted to be liked! So I began to hang out with them, laughing at their silly, gross jokes – stuff I'm not proud of.

There was a girl in our class who was truly different. I think she was a Quaker; her clothes were very old-fashioned and she was not allowed to wear makeup. On top of that, she had been burned as an infant and so one side of her face was scarred. I was merely unpopular, but she was an outcast, an easy target for cruel jokes.

I don't recall that I was ever overtly unkind, but I sure didn't step in to defend her either. I still feel the shame of not stepping in when I could have, to stick up for her and stop the verbal abuse. And I'm guessing that I'm not alone in having those kinds of stories to tell. Insiders. Outsiders. No one wins in that situation.

Peter and the apostles, in the book of Acts, were insiders. All Jews, in their minds, were insiders. *They* were God's chosen people; *they* had been given the Law. The Jews had experienced God's extraordinary protection and favor throughout the years: delivered from slavery by God's mighty arm; given the Promised Land; become a nation through David. Although they had also rebelled against God – repeatedly – time and again God had pursued them and won them back, forgiven and restored them. The Lord was their God, and they were his people, and they were proud of that.

And, like all insiders, they had treated outsiders badly. They had not been a blessing to the Gentiles – as God had intended them to be – but had excluded them. Today's story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman demonstrates the common mindset. She came to Jesus to ask for his help, to heal her daughter. At first, he ignored her; then he gave the expected answer that any Jew might give to a Gentile: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." But she was persistent and in faith cried out, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table!" Only then did Jesus show his true colors, praising her faith and healing her daughter.

Jews, in this book, are the insiders. Gentiles were the outsiders -- despite Jesus' acts of mercy to them, praising their faith; telling a parable about a *good Samaritan*; forgiving the Romans who crucified him. Even then, his fellow Jews didn't quite grasp the depth of Jesus' message. Even though Jesus had told them to go out and make disciples of all nations, they hadn't quite worked out the ramifications of that command. It meant -- letting the kosher laws go. It meant -- associating freely with Gentiles. It meant -- opening up the family to welcome and embrace outsiders – the adopted kids, so to speak, who now get equal love and legacy from God, their Father – and equal acceptance from their new brothers and sisters.

But old habits are hard to break. Enter God's personal involvement. He sent a pair of visions: one to Peter and another to Cornelius, in order to get them together. This pairing of events was critical in turning the people of God inside out. In turning outsiders into insiders. In fact, there was no longer an inside and an outside. Peter made a landmark statement that day – the Civil Rights Act of all time:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. (Acts 10:34-35)

Every nation. And the rest of the book of Acts is the story of how that truth was put into action. Paul became, as we heard last week, an apostle to the Gentiles. This led, in Acts 15, to the Church's first international Council, held in Jerusalem. The Judaizers had been dogging Paul's

footsteps, insisting that all new Gentile converts first be circumcised, effectively making law a condition of grace. But, now, at this Council, the Church officially recognized that God has saved us *by grace alone!* Grace alone! A truth that all Christians have struggled to grasp ever since.

20 centuries later, we are still struggling with this truth. In every chapter of world history, there have been outsiders, and the Church has often been complicit by silence – just like I was with that poor, battered Quaker girl in Middle School. The Jews during Nazi Germany? The Church stayed silent. The internment of Japanese in America? – much of the Church stayed silent. Waves of immigrants – each of which was poorly treated until they found their place in society, whether they were the Irish, or the Vietnamese or those from India/Pakistan. The sad truth is: the Church often lags behind in support of newcomers. Today we still struggle with the lesson Peter proclaimed 2000 years ago – that we are all equal in God’s sight, and should treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Immigrants, Native Americans, black Americans, Latinx and others have all been oppressed – and the Church cannot stand by silently. Because of our biblically-based faith, we should be the first to speak; the first to act; the first to seek mercy and justice on behalf of others. Because that’s what Jesus did.

You know, I am proud of this congregation. We have reached out to our community in many ways: through FISH, Walk for Water, Village House, Mission to Mexico and more. You have, in all these ways, walked the talk. But then I have to ask myself – why are we still pretty much a white church? I have to confess to you, I struggle to embrace the “other;” to sit at table with those different from myself; to welcome them into my home. I am still the girl standing by and not stepping out for the Quaker girl. I sought neither mercy nor justice on her behalf, nor on the behalf of so many who are my brothers and sisters. Our lesson today about Peter and Cornelius, stepping across the threshold, speaks to me today. Perhaps it speaks to you, as well.

But – and here is our hope, dear friends -- the Gospel has the power to transform you and me. It not only turns our world upside down, it turns us inside out. Paul later wrote to the Gentile believers in Ephesus that Jesus had broken down the wall of hostility, making Jews and Gentiles one people! To these Gentiles he wrote,

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

This, my friends, is God's work. This is what he does. He is the Master Builder. And he's moving in to dwell in you. But given the fact that we are all still sinful, resistant to his changes, it can be a painful process. Although I've used this quote by C. S. Lewis before, it bears repeating:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

So there we are. A work in progress! *Under construction*. And it seems to me that it would hurt a whole lot less if I were more willing and less resistant to the work of the Master Builder.

My friends, hear the Good News for today: there are no longer insiders and outsiders! God is turning us inside out – even as he sends us to the ends of the earth -- ambassadors of his transforming love. Amen.