



THE REORIENTATION OF VOCATION V MOVING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Our story this morning is about Peter learning in a vision that there was much more that he could eat than he thought he could. In God's sense of grace and irony I learned just over a week ago, through a blood test, not a vision, that I am diabetic and that the Lord was raising away from me many things that I had previously eaten.

It was a puzzling diagnosis for me. My mom has diabetes and genetics is a determining factor, but the other prominent factors are being overweight and leading a sedentary lifestyle. What gives there? I am reminded of the words of Nancy Kerrigan: "Why me? Why me?"

Peter is asking "why me?" in our passage as well. Peter is a good Jew, which means that he is obedient to the Old Testament law and the Old Testament law is pretty specific on which foods are clean and good and which foods are unclean and sinful. When this sheet falls down, Peter cannot believe that the Lord would have him eat such impure food. Three times it is necessary for Peter to be released from his understanding about what is pure and impure.

Understand what is at issue here for Peter. This is about much more than food preference. This is about Peter's own sense of identity. Peter is at his core a good Jew, just as you and I would identify ourselves as a good Christian. What the vision is asking of Peter is to see himself in a very different way, to abandon an important part of his self-identification, to expand his self-definition.

The vision also challenges Peter to expand his definition of who God is and how God operates. God had made a covenant with the family of Abraham that they would be his chosen people. That chosen status was being read as an exclusive relationship with God. But here in our story, that exclusive nature of God was being challenged by the inclusive nature of the vision that Peter receives.

The lesson of the vision takes on real meaning when Peter encounters Cornelius. Cornelius is what was known as a God-fearer. God-fearers were gentiles who were studying the God of the Hebrews. Cornelius was just a student of God but a doer of the compassionate work of the Lord. And, here in these early days of the church, the Lord comes for Cornelius. Cornelius has been generous to others in the name of the Lord, now the Lord is generous back to him. Peter, moving out of his comfort zone, reorienting and expanding his sense of call will be the agent of God's inclusion.

Doesn't this call to reorient ourselves to an expanded definition of inclusion resonate with all of us? Doesn't it also leave us with the same sense of unease that Peter had? Our human nature is about building boundaries around ourselves. We want the people who look like us, talk like us, even eat like us, to be the ones that we are around. But God doesn't want us living in that sense of exclusivity; he wants us to be an inclusive people. We must ask ourselves if our boundaries are real or false, and whether or not we must expand our boundaries.

The vision moves Peter into a new culture, is the Lord giving you that same vision? We have a crew that just returned from New Orleans and there they experienced a very different culture. They brought with them the love of Jesus and the Good News of the Gospel, and shared it with the people in New Orleans, just as Peter shared the Good News with Cornelius and his household. I've never known anyone that has gone on a cross-cultural mission trip that has not come back with an expanded understanding of the Gospel and a conviction that God is working outside of our own humanly-dictated boundaries.

In order then to reorient Peter, he is given the vision of the foods that he cannot fathom eating and told to eat them. I remember when Jennifer was teaching a three-year-old pre-kindergarten class. It was around Halloween and she was reading a story about a witch who was brewing up witch's stew. Jennifer read about all the ingredients that the witch was putting in the stew – eye of newt, and hair of frog, etc. Then she read that the witch put in a snail. One of the girls in the class had parents who owned a really good restaurant in Memphis, with an eclectic menu. When Jennifer said that the witch added snails, all the kids said, "eww!" except for Lauren, who announced very loudly, "I love snails!" She had never learned that snails were out of bounds, that they were gross or yucky. She thought that they were delicious.

Parents, I wonder in light of our passage this morning, a passage that challenges us to rethink what the Lord considers pure and impure, if we ought to have a spiritual mindset that matches Lauren's parents' gastronomical mindset. I think of the powerful example of the Harringtons who are taking their kids to

minister alongside them with street people. Their kids don't look at the homeless and say, "eww!" they look at the homeless and see God at work. Are we in our children's lives – are we in our own lives – seeing the vision of God for others?

What would the Lord be putting on your sheet this morning? Is it homeless people, or those who struggle with alcohol and drugs, or those who have abandoned their families, or perhaps gay folks? Tony Campolo tells the story of a pastor friend of his who wound up doing a funeral for a gay man who died of AIDS. Here's what Campolo has to say:

"(My friend) said, "About 25 homosexual men came and sat there. Never once, Tony, did they ever look up at me. The whole time I spoke their heads were down and they were looking at the floor. Never once did they ever make eye contact with me all during the funeral. We went out and got in some cars and we followed the hearse out to the cemetery, lowered the body into the grave. I stood on one side of the grave. These 25 some homosexual men on the other side, standing there like statues, neither looking to the right or to the left, looking straight out into infinity. Never budging just sitting there, standing there rigid like statues. I read some scripture. I said some prayers. I committed the body to the grave. I said the benediction and I started to move - walk away, but they didn't move. They stood there as though frozen so I, I came back and I said,

Excuse me, is there anything else I can do?

"And one of the men said, 'Yes. I never go to church. Used to go to church but I don't go to church. The only thing I really liked about church was when they read from the Bible, especially the King James. I like the King James. You didn't read the 23rd psalm. I thought they always read that at funerals. Could you read the 23rd Psalm?'"

Jim opened the Bible and read the 23rd Psalm. Another man said, "There's a passage in the 3rd chapter of John about being born again. I like that passage."

Jim read that. Then a third man said, "The 8th chapter of Romans, right at the end, that's what keeps me going."

And Jim read to these homosexual men. "Neither height nor depth, neither principalities nor powers, neither things present, nor things to come, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Nothing. And when he told me that, I hurt, I hurt, because I knew that these men wanted to hear the Bible but would never step foot inside a church because they are convinced that church people despise them. And do you know why they think church people despise them? Because church people despise them.

I am not approving of homosexual behavior. I am disapproving of a church that has forgotten how to love people that Jesus will never stop loving. And if you don't like it, join another club but don't call yourself a member of the church of Jesus Christ for we are the community of lovers and we love all kinds of people with all kinds of sin and that's your good fortune and mine too, for where would we be without such a church. And I want it to be the church that Christ wants it to be." ¹ (see footnote)

What does God have on your sheet? How are you going to respond to God? I am thankful again this morning for Peter, or "Three-time Peter." Peter never gets things right away, or the first time. Three times he will deny Jesus. Three times he will be told by the resurrected Jesus to "feed my sheep." And here in this story he must be told three times to expand his understanding of where the Lord has called him to proclaim the Good News.

Jesus has spoken to all of us, once, twice, three times, maybe more. Is he speaking to you today? Is he calling you to go out of your comfort zone? Is he calling you to reorient your understanding of the Gospel from exclusion to inclusion?

¹ Tony & Peggy Compolo, "Is The Homosexual My Neighbor?"; <http://www.bridges-across.org/ba/campolo.htm>