

Impartiality

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 42:1-9

Reading from the New Testament: Acts 10:34-43

The sharing of a meal plays an important role in the narrative of scripture. Excluding the notorious dine and dash incident in the garden of Eden, the gathered meal has been a prime vehicle for opening the door to the formation of relationships, families, communities, and callings. Abraham and Sarah received the covenant of God when welcoming to their table angels unawares. The nation of Israel was sourced and framed by a shared meal on a fateful night in Egypt. It was at the table that Mephibosheth, whose life had been marked by tragedy, misfortune, and disability found welcome and a home with King David. With a handful of grain the prophet Elijah sustains a household in Zarephath through a drought. Jesus revealed the grace of God in eating with sinners and tax collectors. The risen Lord fixed breakfast for the disciples and dined anonymously with grieving travelers on the road to Emmaus, opening their eyes to the hope of the gospel. And in an upper room on the night of his arrest, while at table with his closest disciples, Jesus established a new covenant of salvation sealed with his body and blood. “He took a loaf of bread and he broke it...”

It is so often that in the simple act of gathering for a meal, the veil between heaven and earth turns gossamer thin. And that was certainly the case at a dinner party in the coastal city of Caesarea in the home of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. As dinner parties go, this occasion would rank among the most significant, paradigm shifting meals in history, not so much because of the menu, but primarily because of the guest list. It may have been Cornelius' kitchen, but it was certainly the Holy Spirit who was present as the host.

Like Rotarians gathered for a special program, the family and friends of Cornelius crowded into his home, anxiously anticipating the arrival and presentation of a decidedly different kind of guest. One of the quirks of my little hometown is that it is the host of the annual Miss Missouri pageant, and every year Miss Missouri, along with a representative cast of contestants, is the featured program at a meeting of the local Rotary Club. For some reason, it is typically the best-attended meeting of the year.

Every group, club, and civic, religious, or fraternal organization will have several gatherings when most members look longingly at the exits, ducking out at the first opportunity, but on rare occasions, a noted speaker

or provocative guest will draw out members you didn't even know were still on the roster. Each year, Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond hosts the Sprunt lectures, a series unfortunately named for an historic benefactor who also happened to be a gun-runner in the Civil War. Annually, students and alumnae are encouraged to return to campus as the seminary welcomes a noted scholar who basically spends a few days reading from a new and decidedly dense academic work they are on the cusp of publishing. Scintillating stuff, right? Typically, whether it was Schaufler Hall or the sanctuary of Ginter Park Presbyterian, the pews would fill up on the first night, primarily because of the reunions and meetings that are glommed onto the series. Yet, with each succeeding lecture, the crowd gets smaller and smaller until it is no longer a crowd, but only a prayer circle.

However, one year, the beloved Fred Craddock was the featured lecturer, and while you may have never heard of the guy, let me tell you, among preachers he was like having Taylor Swift in the building, and that sanctuary was jam-packed every day and night right through to the end. No one wanted to miss a thing.

The encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Caesarea would garner this same level of interest among those who scored an invitation to the party, not to mention the others who managed to crash the event through an open window or past an inattentive bouncer. Forget calendars and commitments, this was a drop everything and show up event.

Cornelius would have been a respected member of his community. As a centurion, he was the commander of 100 men. A member of the Italian Cohort, Cornelius was a Roman citizen, and most importantly, in regard to this occasion, Cornelius was a gentile. But it wasn't Cornelius' standing in the community or his authority over his soldiers that generated the buzz. It was the Spirit of God, busily working behind the scenes to shake up all religious norms and upset all cultural expectations by simply bringing together two strangers, a soldier and a fisherman.

For, you see, this was the moment the promise of God to Abraham would be realized - "...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This was the moment the fulness of the gospel, as described by John, would be actualized - "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved

through him.” This was the moment, later expounded by Paul, that God’s purpose of reconciliation would be made evident - “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

The Spirit of God had moved Cornelius, a Roman officer and a gentile, and Peter, a Galilean Jew and leader of this new movement of Christ followers, to make this meeting happen in order to visibly and physically demonstrate what Paul would later explain - “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

What is fascinating here is that Peter and Cornelius were only beginning to understand what God was doing in and through this encounter. They really didn’t comprehend much more than the people gathered at Cornelius’s house. The Spirit was way ahead of them, drawing them together though they did not fully perceive the world changing implications of their meeting. And isn’t that the way of the Spirit of God?

Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth, Isaiah, Amos, and even John the Baptist were seldom if ever in a place where they could confidently say, *Hey, I've got this*. You've heard the old maxim: God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called. Faith is a journey of unending discovery. I don't know what the future holds for my life, my ministry, or this church. I just pray for the wisdom to discern the gap between my ideas and God's leading. There is little to no value for certitude or arrogance in the life of faith or the calling of the church.

Frederick Buechner recalls Karl Barth saying "that reading the Bible is like looking out of the window and seeing everybody on the street shading their eyes with their hands and gazing up into the sky toward something hidden from us by the roof. They are pointing up. They are speaking strange words. They are very excited. Something is happening that we can't see happening. Or something is about to happen. Something beyond our comprehension has caught them up and is seeking to lead them on 'from land to land for strange, intense, uncertain, and yet mysteriously well-planned service.'

“To read the Bible is to try to read the expression on their faces. To listen to the words of the Bible is to try to catch the sound of the queer, dangerous, and compelling word they seem to hear.” (Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*)

That is an apt image for how the Spirit of God moves Cornelius and Peter, separately and simultaneously, to come together in a way that shatters all our assumptions and expectations. A Roman Gentile and a Palestinian Jew come together, breaking all sorts of cultural and religious barriers, following a mysterious instinct that has come upon them, without fully comprehending what they are doing, yet clearly demonstrating in ways they cannot yet conceive, that God does not intend for us to separate and categorize and organize ourselves into delineated cells on a spreadsheet, utensils in the silverware drawer, color wheels at the paint store, or majors in a course catalogue.

Sensing that something so much bigger than him is taking place, and like a spokesperson nervously rising to speak extemporaneously about an event that is just evolving as he or she speaks, Peter, trusting the movement of the Spirit, stands to narrate what he sees happening at the same time he is just beginning to perceive it. “I truly understand that God shows no

partiality ... You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

With those words, the exclusiveness of religion and culture are swept aside by the inclusiveness of God. What the Spirit coordinated and hosted in Caesarea was an object lesson that would transform our understanding of God's purpose, and yet, it remains a lesson that we have made far too little progress in learning and emulating. The insanity of nations invading other nations for no grander purpose than they want what they don't have; the tribalism of the powerful who place personal agendas before the common good; the fracturing of churches into factions too content in their self-righteousness to demonstrate the breadth, depth, and expansiveness of God's love. Peter was just beginning to truly understand that God shows no partiality, yet in these polarized days, would an observer readily identify that elementary understanding in you or me?

Theologian Samuel Wells speaks of the serial lessons in humility from which we are slow to learn. "Have you never rolled your eyes in exasperation at a driver who would not yield to you, only sometime later to be so fixated on getting urgently to your destination that your chose today

to be first at every light and regard all other road users as obstacles to your plans? ...How often have you looked upon what another person said or did with horror, fury, or scorn only to find yourself, ten years (or minutes) later, saying or doing much the same?" Thus, he suggests, "Be sparing with your horror, fury, and scorn, lest they rebound on you and make you lamentable in your own sight ... A little generosity of heart inclines us to look to our fellow creatures with gentleness rather than bitterness, compassion rather than anger, understanding rather than condemnation." (Samuel Wells, *Be Humble*)

Similarly, author Brian McLaren speaks of what he calls generous orthodoxy, a framework defined not by *what we think* as opposed to *what they think*, but rather a framework acknowledging that truth is located in "*what God knows, some of which we believe a little, some of which they believe a little, and about which we all have a whole lot to learn.*" (Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*)

Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Peter is not saying that what we believe doesn't matter. He is telling us that God's love is far greater than he had ever dreamt. Our calling is not to proclaim what is right. Our calling is to witness to a love that is always grander than our imagination. Amen.