
5TH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

APRIL 28, 2013

WHO AM I TO STAND IN GOD'S WAY?

Pastor Jim Dunn (With thanks to Robert Hoehner and Jeffrey Oswald)

Acts 11:1-18

Peter Reports to the Church

11 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. **2** So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, **3** "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." **4** But Peter began and explained it to them in order: **5** "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. **6** Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. **7** And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' **8** But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' **9** But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' **10** This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. **11** And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. **12** And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. **13** And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; **14** he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' **15** As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. **16** And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' **17** If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" **18** When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

This past week, two of our members, Dee and Paul Krahenbuhl, shared a story with me. One day Dee, Paul, and their son, Randy, were out on the farm. They were taking a walk through the woods and doing some target practice. Now, first you have to know that Randy is an expert marksman. He was a US Army Ranger, and he'll soon be returning from Afghanistan where he's been training soldiers. Well, one day the three of them were out in the Missouri woods taking target practice. At one point they were trying to hit a small can, like a tomato paste can. Paul missed it by a mile. Randy, the former US Army Ranger, didn't hit it. Dee put a hole dead center in the middle of the can. As it turns out, Dee grew up on the farm, hunting rabbits and squirrels. And not just for the sport of it. I told her that's how it was with my mother's family, too. My mom grew up on the farm, and on visits there as a kid I had the opportunity to eat rabbit and squirrel, and I especially enjoyed fried squirrel.

Now, that's where some people would take issue. They might try a lot of things, but squirrel is not one of them. I'm no different. I don't think I would eat possum. And if we name enough critters, there's bound to be one that you would not like to see on your dinner table: beaver, armadillo, gopher, fox, weasel, raccoon, nutria, muskrat. However, if these animals were ones that Peter saw in his vision, he was not to take issue. In his vision, Peter saw all kinds of animals the Old Covenant said were unclean. "Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles..." Peter said. "Kill and eat them," God commanded. Do not take issue! "What God has made clean, do not call common."

Isn't it the same with people? Those **people** whom God makes clean are not to be treated as common. As God leads you to share the Gospel with people you perceive as different, you must not take issue. That was God's other command to Peter. No sooner had Peter's vision ended, than three men arrived at the door. They were to take Peter to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, a commander in the Roman army, an uncircumcised man, who ate not in accordance with the food laws of the Old Covenant. But the Holy Spirit commanded Peter to not take issue, to not treat Cornelius's men as common compared to himself. "And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction."

Make no distinctions among people. Where you perceive they are different from you, do not take issue. Why? Just so you can eat together? Is that why the Holy Spirit led Peter to the house of Cornelius? Just so they could eat some muskrat together? No. So that Peter could share the saving Gospel with Cornelius. Cornelius had been given his own vision. And in that vision the Lord told him that Peter “will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.” And the Holy Spirit is leading you to share that same saving message of the Gospel with people that you perceive as different from yourself as Peter was from Cornelius. But do not take issue, the Holy Spirit commands. Don’t let what you perceive as differences become walls against sharing the Gospel.

What if they are walls that we love and cherish? Like the Jewish food laws and circumcision were cherished. These were the walls that had separated God’s people from the Gentiles and protected them for hundreds of years, even when they lived among Gentiles in slavery. Dietary laws, like not eating pork, as well as circumcising their baby boys kept the Israelites distinct as the people of God, as when Daniel and his friends remained faithful to God while living in exile in Babylon. Those were cherished walls.

So, when Jewish Christians in Jerusalem heard that Peter had torn down those walls, had gone into the home of an uncircumcised man and eaten with him forbidden foods, had not taken issue with the whole idea of sitting and eating what was unclean with an unclean Gentile, they took issue with Peter. They criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Even Peter himself had been reluctant to tear down those walls. When told in the vision to eat the unclean animals he had refused, “By no means, Lord.” In the original language, that statement cannot be stated more strongly. Peter was in effect saying: I’m not going to eat unclean animals! Not ever! Not on your life! Over my dead body!

Our own reaction may not be that outwardly intense, but God’s people today have walls we love and cherish. Walls we are reluctant to tear down. For some of us, the wall we love may be our style of music, which can be a barrier to sharing the Gospel across cultures.

For some of us, the walls we love may be those musical instruments we think are the only ones that should be heard in our sanctuary.

For some of us, the wall we love may be what we think of as the solemn reverence of our worship, which to us does not seem to transition well into hand clapping or lifting our hands in praise.

When we hold onto these walls, as well as others, we can be guilty of getting in God's way, of standing in God's way. But He will do His Gospel sharing work with us or without us.

Would the Lord then simply bulldoze us out of the way? Three times the Lord repeated His vision message to a refusing Peter: "Kill and eat... What God has made clean, do not call common." Three times God repeated this message to Peter, according to His grace. The Lord was determined to work through Peter. So, He said, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat."

This is resurrection language! Rise, Peter! Here the same word for rise is used as when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead in Acts chapter nine. It's the same word Jesus used to refer to His own resurrection. This is resurrection language.

Instead of bulldozing Peter, **the Lord raised** and renewed Peter. And in that spiritual resurrection and renewal, **the Lord enabled** Peter to follow the Spirit's leading and tear down the walls and go and take that step toward Cornelius and sharing the Gospel with him. And when that happened, **the Lord caused** the Holy Spirit to fall upon Cornelius and his household the same way He had fallen upon the disciples on Pentecost. They received repentance to life. And later when Peter reported all of this to his fellow Jewish Christians when they took issue with him, those Jewish Christians fell silent. **The Lord led** them also to repent. He renewed them, like Peter, in repentance to life.

Baptism is where your repentance to life first occurred. And in the remembrance of your Baptism today is where repentance to life occurs again. It's a starting over. Baptized into Christ's death, your sins are forgiven. Salvation is yours. And baptized into Christ's resurrection, **the Lord raises** you to newness of life. And in that spiritual resurrection and renewal **the Lord enables** you and I to join Peter in saying: "Who am I to stand in God's way?" **The Lord enables** us to begin where we can to tear down the walls.

Amen!