

Ripples

Part 15: The Gospel Crosses Racial and Religious Lines

Acts 10.1-11.18

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As we walk through life we cannot help but notice the differences between us and other people.

Just walking down the sidewalk or through an airport or through the aisles at Payless or down the hall at school we cannot help but see differences.

We pick up our phones and scroll through our threads or thumb through the headlines and we cannot help but see differences.

In his wonderful book *How Do We Understand Ourselves*, in which he sums up some of the most important findings from psychology experiments over the past four decades, David Myers writes that one of the most important and consistent findings of all is this:

Similarity attracts. People are drawn to those with whom they share attitudes, beliefs, interests, age, religion, education, intelligence, economic status, ethnicity . . . the list goes on. Likeness leads to liking. (p92)

He goes on to point out two other crucial findings:

No matter what our similarities may be with others, our attention inevitably looks past those similarities and focuses on our differences. (p103)

And,

Focusing on our differences, we naturally divide our worlds into “us” and “them,” an in-group and an out-group. (p103)

In the passage we're studying today we follow Peter, one of the earliest of Jesus' followers, as he encounters and responds to differences in beliefs and differences in ethnicity, giving us a great model to follow as we seek to build relationships across lines of difference as followers of Christ.

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This morning we are looking at the story of Peter's missionary journey that is found in Acts 9, 10, and 11. It's a long portion of Scripture so let me just give you the highlight reel:

Chapter Nine: From Jerusalem to the Plains of Sharon

Several years after Jesus ascended to heaven and the Spirit descended on the church – probably somewhere between five and eight years later – Peter leaves Jerusalem, where he and the disciples are carrying out their ministry, and heads west, traveling around the country to visit fellow followers of Jesus where Phillip has been doing his ministry.

First stop: Lydda, a smallish city about twenty five miles west of Jerusalem, located right where the central foothills begin to flatten out into the Plain of Sharon ..

Lydda was a staunchly Jewish city. Known as a center of Jewish commerce and scholarship for the five centuries leading up to the time of Jesus, the city was filled with Jewish schools, study centers, and synagogues.

A Christian believer there named Aeneas has been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years.

Acts 9.34-35

“Aeneas,” Peter said to him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat.” Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

Second stop: Joppa, eleven miles further west. Today called Yafa, it has been absorbed into the massive city of Tel Aviv. In Peter's day it was a seaside town that sat on a rock outcropping overlooking the Mediterranean and the only natural harbor along Israel's coastline. In what is not an insignificant parallel, Joppa is the place where Jonah hopped a ship in the hopes of escaping God's call to go to the nations and proclaim a message of forgiveness.

Like Lydda, it too had a strong Jewish community and was also a center of Jewish scholarship.

But the city had a painful history of persecution. Two hundred years before Peter's visit, during the Maccabean revolt against Greek rule, the non-Jewish inhabitants of the city offered to help all the Jews in the city to flee to safety in their boats and then deliberately sank the ships, killing them all. Over the next hundred years the Jews attacked the city again and again in retribution, eventually taking it over. By the time Peter arrived it was an ethnically divided city but under the control of Jewish leaders.

In Joppa there was a seamstress named Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) who was a disciple of Jesus. Tabitha had a wonderful reputation throughout the Christian community for her heart of generosity and her care for others.

While Peter was in Lydda, Tabitha got sick and died. Hearing that Peter was just ten miles away, they sent two men to go for him.

Peter went with them, and when he got there he prayed over her body and she came back to life.

Acts 9.42

This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

Then we're told Peter stayed in Joppa for awhile, living right by the sea in the home of Simon, who tanned skins for a living.

Chapter Ten: From Joppa to Caesarea

Meanwhile, in Caesarea, 30 miles up the coast, there lives a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a man who has a deep spiritual life, who loves God and loves to serve the people God has put around him, but who is neither a Jew nor a Christian.

One day when he is praying he has a vision of an angel who tells him to send some men to Joppa and bring back a man named Peter, who is staying with Simon the Tanner. He does as he is told, and soon his servants are on their way.

Back in Joppa, the next day Peter is on the deck on the roof of his host's house when he too has a vision.

Three times in a row, a large sheet, possibly a tablecloth, is lowered from heaven. In the sheet is a collection of different kinds of animals used for food around the world.

As you probably know, in the book of Leviticus in the Jewish Old Testament there are lists of foods, some of which are considered ritually acceptable to eat and some of which are not. When Peter looks at the collection of creatures in the sheet, he sees some of both, all jumbled together.

A voice tells Peter to prepare the food and to eat it.

Acts 10.14

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

To his surprise,

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happens three times. Then his vision ends, and Peter is left to puzzle over what it means.

The obvious meaning of the vision is that God is overturning the ritual food laws. But what if the image had a deeper meaning?

While he is still trying to make sense of it, Cornelius's men arrive at Simon's house. They tell him about Cornelius's vision and ask Peter to come back with them to Caesarea.

Peter agrees, and the next morning he and six of the Christian believers from Joppa head out.

Peter's Mission Journey



As Peter and his friends make their way north, let me pause to tell you about where they're going. Caesarea was the second largest city in Israel, and where Jerusalem was the Jewish religious capital of the region, Caesarea was the Roman administrative capital. This is where Pontius Pilate and the other governors like Felix lived. This was a Roman city through and through.

Herod the Great was the one who named the city Caesarea, naming it after Caesar Augustus when he gave the city to Rome after he built a new artificial harbor there – the largest in the world at that time – and a temple for the worship of the Roman emperor. The city had a Roman hippodrome, theater, aqueducts, arena, and a lavish palace where the governor lived.

So as we travel with Peter on this mission journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea, we travel from the Jewish religious capital of the world, to a city that is a stronghold of Jewish thought but has a small population of non-Jews, to a city that has a tense, divided community of Jews and non-Jews which is currently controlled by the Jews, to

the Roman capital of the region dominated by non-Jewish foreigners but with a small minority of Jews.

Let's let the text tell the story from here.

Acts 10, picking up in verse 24:

²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.

And now comes the potentially awkward and abrupt end of the whole affair. Verse 28:

²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile."

Let me pause here. Three things.

First, he speaks of "our law" and of being a Jew.

I just want to remind you that during the time of the early church, and in many ways still today, the word "Jew" had two overlapping meanings. A Jew is someone who is a blood descendant of Jacob, also called Israel. So Jew can refer to one's ethnicity.

But a Jew is also someone who adheres to the faith of the religion of Judaism, a faith with its beliefs and practices rooted in the Old Testament, including cleanliness laws and the sacrificial system and the temple and so on.

To complicate things just a bit further, virtually all of the early Christians, including Peter, were ethnically Jewish and came out of the Jewish faith.

And the Christian faith is unique in that it affirms the Jewish Scriptures, but interprets them through a new lens, which is the lens of Jesus the Son of God having come and fulfilled the Jewish law, and having established a new covenant. Which raises huge questions about which of the laws and promises still apply.

So at the time we walk with Peter and his friends into the house of Cornelius, the early church was doing a lot of hard work trying to figure out what exactly was the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, and between the law and the gospel, and what it meant to read the Old Covenant through the New Covenant instead of next to it.

This turns out to be one of those defining and clarifying moments.

Okay, second, about the word "Gentile." In verse 28 Peter says:

"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile."

Literally this word in Greek just means "the nations" or "the people groups."

As in Psalm 67:

- ³ May the peoples praise you, God;
may all the peoples praise you.
- ⁴ May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth.

The word "Gentile" doesn't say anything about being Jewish or not. In fact, it is a word that is sometimes used of the Jewish people themselves right alongside the other nations.

But by the time of the early church, "Gentile" is a loaded word among Jews, and for many it has come to have a meaning something like "those second-class, non-Jewish people who should be avoided when possible."

Think about the irony of that. When God first established the Jewish people, in his charter for them in Genesis 12, he told them that his design was to place them in the midst of the other nations of the world for the express purpose of blessing *them* – with the goal that all peoples on earth would be blessed through them.

But over time that vision got lost, and the Jewish people came to see themselves in an oppositional way to everybody else: the Jewish nation here, and the other nations, the *goyim* in Hebrew, the *ethne* in Greek, the *Gentiles* in Latin, over there.

More and more the posture of the Jewish people toward people of other faiths and other ethnicities was to pull back from them, thinking that was the best way to honor God by safeguarding their purity. So they lost track of their fundamental charter to be the hands and feet by which God blessed the people of all nations.

And that was where Peter was too. Right up until his vision.

Now look at those words Jew and Gentile in the context of the rest of the sentence. In Acts 10.28, as he walks into this Gentile's home, Peter says to them:

"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile."

That phrase "against our law" means something that is not allowed. It could mean it is against a command. It could also mean it is against a custom.

That phrase also has a connotation of something that is indecent or improper, something no good Jew would be caught doing.

Why? Out of fear that you would eat food that was considered unclean, or it was kosher food but had not been properly tithed, or it had been offered first to the pagan gods, or that it had come in contact with a person or an object that was considered ritually impure. Lots of reasons.

So was it actually *against the law* for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, to enter the home of a non-Jew and eat a meal with them? Absolutely not!

Leviticus 19:34 says:

The foreigner who resides with you must be to you like a native citizen among you; so you must love him as yourself.

And Deuteronomy 10:18-19 says:

God shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

However, the Book of Jubilees, not a book in the Old Testament written in the century before Jesus, was an extremely influential Jewish book at this time. It says, "Separate yourself from the nations and eat not with them." (22.16)

And this was not a subtle secret that the Jews kept among themselves. The non-Jews knew it and felt it. Literature from the day shows that the non-Jewish people were deeply hurt and offended by the way Jews would either refuse to come into their homes, or if they did, they would bring their own food and drink and refuse to touch anything or anyone in the house.

Part of what Peter is sorting out is what part of his faith is biblical and should be kept, and what part is Jewish tradition and doesn't need to be held onto.

Which makes what Peter says next so powerful.

²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.

Peter shows that he has understood that the vision he saw wasn't about animals or food. Not primarily. Peter realizes it was about *people*.

Up to this point he had accepted the Jewish tradition regarding eating apart from non-Jews as law. But the heart of the revelation God gave to Peter is that there is nothing

wrong with entering the home of someone whose beliefs or background are different from your own and eating a meal with them.

God by his spirit has shown Peter that, in Christ, all nationalities, all ethnicities, are equal in God's sight, and all can freely enjoy each other's company despite their differences.

Picking up the story. Peter asks his host:

"May I ask why you sent for me?"

Cornelius tells about his vision. Verse 33:

³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

Just to stop there for a moment. This is a profound realization on Peter's part.

Some of you may be aware that the King James translation of this passage says, "I perceive that God is no respecter of persons." This is one of many good reasons to use a translation of the Bible that is not 400 years old.

That was a good translation back then, when the words meant something different. But what the Greek says is, "I now realize how true it is that God does not welcome or receive people on the basis of their outward appearance." Including their ethnicity.

Then Peter goes on to tell those who have gathered who Jesus is and why he came and the forgiveness and new life he offers us..

³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the

living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues^[b] and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Acts 11: The Scene Shifts Back to Jerusalem

¹ The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: [about his vision, and the men who came to his house, and his going to Caesarea and entering into Cornelius's house and sharing the gospel, and the people from the nations receiving the good news and responding in faith.]

Then Peter wraps up his story by saying this in chapter 11, starting in verse 15:

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When [the apostles and believers in Jerusalem] heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

* * *

Let me share some conclusions about relating across ethnic lines and other lines of difference that I think we are compelled to draw from this story.

As we find ourselves in a world very similar to the first century world, filled with all sorts of individuals from all sorts of different ethnicities and different nations and different ideologies and different faiths and different moral values, I think these are some of the conclusions that are pressed on us.

1. Christianity is radically exclusive:

First of all, Peter shows that we cannot buy into the prevailing way of thinking that says all faiths are just different roads to the same destination. This passage makes it clear that Christianity is radically exclusive. God insists that it is only through faith in his Son Jesus Christ that relationship with God is possible and forgiveness for sins is available.

Acts 4.12:

Salvation is found ***in no one else***, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.

Acts 10.36:

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace ***through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all***.

Acts 10.43:

All the prophets testify about him that everyone ***who believes in him*** receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

John 14.6:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father ***except through me***."

So even in the midst of our plural world, which insists that Christianity is narrow-minded and rude for insisting that there is only one way to come into relationship with God, faithfulness in expressing the Christian message means we need to be faithful in declaring that there is no other way. Christianity is radically exclusive.

2. Christianity is radically inclusive

At the same time, through his encounter with Cornelius and the non-Jewish men and women in his home who became followers of Jesus, Peter shows us that Christianity is radically inclusive. It does not confine itself to one ethnicity or one nation or one political party or one worldview.

Acts 10.34-35:

God does not show favoritism but accepts ***from every nation*** the one who fears him and does what is right.

Acts 10.43:

All the prophets testify about him that ***everyone*** who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Acts 11.18:

So then, ***even to Gentiles*** God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Galatians 3.28:

There is ***neither Jew nor Gentile*** ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

3. God's Loving Intentions Have Always Included All Nations

Every human being we ever encounter is of value in God's eyes and is the object of his loving pursuit, and we as his people are called to love every person we encounter indiscriminately, showing no favorites just as God shows no favorites, opening our arms and our home and our table for all, in order that we who have been blessed by God might be a blessing to all the peoples of this world.

Remember the charter of God's people, where this all started . . .

Genesis 12.2-3:

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

And remember where this all got reiterated again . . .

Matthew 28.18-20:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

And remember where all this is going . . .

Revelation 7.9:

There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

Revelation 21.23-24:

The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light

God's design is to create nothing less than a new humanity which will include the faces and voices and languages of people from every nation and people group around the world. So how could we not open our homes and open our hearts to men and women from those people groups today?

4. Farewell to Us/Them Thinking

Here's one final crucial implication. Our world trains us to think in us/them categories: Purdue versus all those other schools, Democrats faced off against Republicans, whites as distinct from other races, Americans on one side and other nationalities on the other. Peter models for us what it looks like to abandon those false divisions and to embrace who we are as one: one Lord, one faith, one family.

You can see the shift in his thinking even as the events unfold:

Acts 10.45-47: *They* have received the Holy Spirit just as *we* have.

Acts 11.17: The Lord gave *them* the same gift he gave *us*.

Acts 10.43: *Everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

God gives Peter a vision that teaches him that as we walk through this world there is only one distinction that matters:

Is this person before me someone who knows Jesus, and therefore, regardless of our differences, is my sister or brother whom I am called to love, and who as a result is worthy of my respect and honor and love and encouragement?

Or is this person before me someone who does not yet know Jesus, who regardless of our differences, is worthy of my respect and honor and love and hospitality, and someone with whom it is my responsibility and privilege to share the good news of Jesus?

There is only one difference that matters. And that difference doesn't determine whether or not I love the person before me, but how.

* * *

SJ and I were talking about this after her message a couple of weeks ago. More and more I'm convinced that the bottom line starting point for our every interaction comes down to just two things:

1. Openly declare your allegiance to King Jesus.

Somehow let the person know that Jesus and only Jesus is the one who makes sense of your life and that you have given your allegiance to him. There are a hundred different gracious ways to do that, as SJ shared with us.

And then

2. Love indiscriminately whoever God puts before you.

Whether or not you like them. Whether or not you look like them. Whether or not you think like them. Whether or not you see things like them. Whether or not you approve of them. Whether or not they like you.

Love them.

By doing that, we communicate to the world around us, that his love has a bigger table than we can imagine, and there's a place for each of us there.

Prayer

While our worship team comes up, would you talk with the Lord?

What new vision of the people around you does God want to give you this morning?

And how does he intend for you to be the way he makes his love known in this world?