

EKKLESIA 6-A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS 10
SEPTEMBER 23, 2018

More than any time in American history, you are what you eat. With the highest levels of access and availability and choice ever, Americans have almost endless options. Every choice says something more than a simple decision about nutrition going into your body. Vegan, Vegetarian, Organic, Paleo, Keto, Pescatarian, gluten-free, dairy-free, taste-free. These are all options, but most of these are not just elective choices. They are meant to speak to your identity, to your worldview, to who you are. More than ever in American history, you are what you eat. I love the biscuits and gravy plate at Bobbies Café, and I totally agree.

Notice I said more than any time in American history because I would contend that another people group in another time was even more invested in the idea, you are what you eat. This group's dietary restrictions informed their religion, their politics and their communal life. First century Jews completely believed they were what they ate. It affected their very righteousness before God, so it was of utmost importance.

Leviticus is one of the primary books of law in the Pentateuch. If the other books like Deuteronomy cover the big topics like the Ten Commandments, Leviticus is more focused upon the ceremonial and worship laws of being a Jew. There are laws about sacrifices, laws about sex and laws about food. A key theme throughout the book of Leviticus is holiness. Time and again God calls his people to be holy, and he calls them to be holy by observing certain laws and rituals. I want to read to you from Leviticus 20:24-26.

Leviticus 20:24-26

A few key things to note in this passage, holiness, separation and food. They are all tied together. In verse 24 he offers to them a land of milk and honey because he is the Lord God

who separates them from other people. In verse 25, he tells them to separate the types of food they eat so they will be set apart as his people. Again, in verse 26 after talking about distinctions regarding food, it is reiterated one more time for good measure, "I have set you apart so that you will be mine."

Now then, you have a small introduction to our passage today, and it might allow you, for a moment, to understand why this passage is so monumental. Our passage today gets told and repeated several times from different angles. Two things happen in our story. A Gentile man named Cornelius is told by God to send for a man named Peter. Several miles away a Jewish man named Peter had a dream about food. These stories are completely intertwined. At the heart of this passage today, I want you to see that God changes how his church sees people. Who they should include and exclude, and he uses food to make his point.

In our passage, we are going to see two separate men whom God brings together. I want to show you three quick episodes and the tie that binds them together.

Acts 10:1-7

Cornelius was a God-fearer, which means he probably worshipped in the synagogues, but he was kept separate from the Jews because he was an uncircumcised Gentile. Cornelius is a man who is pursuing a righteous life, but he does not truly know the Righteous One. God speaks to Cornelius and tells him to send for Peter who is staying in the house of Simon the Tanner. God doesn't tell Cornelius what will happen after that or what Peter will say when he arrives, but he tells him to send for Peter.

A couple things to note regarding Cornelius before we move to the next episode. I have told you before that Jews were not fond of the Romans. In the Jews' mind, Romans were unlawfully occupying the Promised Land that God had given to them as their inheritance. On top of that, they were Gentiles which meant they were unclean. They ate unclean things, they touched

unclean things, they lived unclean lives and they worshipped unclean gods. You are what you eat, and this man was unclean in every sense of the word. On top of all of that, this was a Roman Centurion. He was a soldier who represented the harsh physical oppression of the Roman Empire in their midst.

Another thing to note, Peter was staying with a tanner. This is essentially like a practicing vegetarian living inside a butcher's shop. Peter knew you are what you eat and that his identity as a separated follower of God was tied up with staying ritually clean. So while Peter was not consuming foods that had been declared unclean, he was living in a house full of spattered blood and a plethora of dead animal carcasses. I envision Peter was sleeping in one corner of the house and tried desperately to remain clean by avoiding the blood and these unclean animals on a daily basis. Now then, let's go on to episode two where God seemingly changes his mind.

Acts 10:9-16

The men have left from Caesarea and are on their way towards Peter. These unclean Romans are heading to this separate and pure Jew. Peter received a vision from the Lord and three times he saw this picture of these animals on a large sheet. I like to think of this as a big tablecloth and upon it are all of these animals that have been declared unclean. The first time, God tells him to kill and eat these unclean animals. Peter, in classic Peter fashion, says I will never do that. I am clean and I will continue to maintain my cleanness. In order to drive his point home, God sends this same message to Peter three times.

A couple things to note here. Peter had been watching Simon, the tanner, kill animals like these on a regular basis. Some which were unclean to eat, and others were unclean because they were dead carcasses and the blood itself was unclean. Cow hides. Goat pelts. He had seen the dark and gross side of these animals, and I am guessing he doesn't have much of an appetite for any of them. Beside the fact that they have been declared unclean by God, I am guessing these

are not appetizing prospects. Casey has an uncle who used to work in a chicken-processing factory in Texas, and to this day, decades later, he won't eat chicken. He saw how the chicken was made, and it ruined it for him.

This episode also conjures up a seminal moment, and a paradigm shift in the life of Peter. On the final night of his life, Jesus is going around to his disciples and washing their feet, and Peter says, "You shall never wash my feet." Again Peter is resting in his own self-maintenance of cleanness. I want you to notice that there is an undeniable connection between these two events. On that final night in the upper room, Peter is sticking to an old mentality. If I do the right things, I can remain clean.

When our daughter was younger, she had an interesting understanding of cleanliness. I actually used to think she didn't like being dirty. It was easy to think this because any time she got dirt or mud on her feet or hands, she quickly became upset and said, "I'm dirty." She wanted the problem fixed immediately. This led me to think of her as a clean little girl, but then we allowed her to have a lollipop after a kid's birthday party, and she absolutely loved it. She loved it so much that sticky lollipop was all over her legs, her hands, her face and her hair. She was like a walking piece of fly paper. After assessing the damage, I told her she needed a bath. She also assessed the damage and said, "I'm not dirty." As it turns out, her idea of being clean is quite different from her father's. Let's look at the final episode.

Acts 10:17-33

The men who were sent by Cornelius arrived and asked Peter to come with them. Peter invited them in to the butcher's shop. Can you imagine Peter's angst at the moment? He is surrounded by unclean animals who disgust him because of their uncleanness, and he is also surrounded by some animal skins. For Peter, a passionate man, I am sure that this is more than a bit uncomfortable. These Romans represented all that was wrong and unclean. Not only did the scriptures tell them they were unclean, he probably didn't have much of an appetite for them

because they had oppressed his people and invaded his land. Peter decided to push back against his discomfort and invited these men into the house.

The next day Peter went with the men on a journey to Caesarea to meet this man named Cornelius. Cornelius in the meantime invited all of his friends and family members to hear what this Jewish fisherman had to say. Through the end of chapter 10, Peter will preach to this household about Jesus, and they will all come to faith and the Holy Spirit comes upon all of them.

What's great about this entire story is it's about as subtle as a punch in the face. There is no denying the message that arises from this passage. Cornelius had the vision. A two-day journey away, Peter received a vision (three times, just so it is clear). God set a divine appointment for these two men. When Peter arrived, he heard how God was speaking to Cornelius, so he preached to them and they came to faith. This was no accident. This was on purpose. This was orchestrated by God.

All of this was so heavy-handed because this paradigm shift would have been so hard to swallow. God orchestrated this event on both ends and made it impossibly clear to Peter and Cornelius because no one would have been able to embrace this truth otherwise. This truth, this paradigm shift, was God extending grace even to the Gentiles. It was not just for the Jews.

As a side note, you might remember that his grace was already extended to the Gentiles and the Samaritans. You remember from chapter 8 that Phillip preached to Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch. The only reason that happened was Phillip didn't know any better. He was most likely a Gentile who had converted to Judaism. He had not been institutionalized yet, so he just went off and shared Jesus with whoever came across his path, but Peter knew better. He knew that God had declared certain foods unclean and some people unclean, and this man was unclean. God had to shake him up and show him the truth that was right there in front of him. Jesus is for all people.

I know you see this, but Peter's vision wasn't just about food. It was a picture of a much bigger paradigm shift. God was calling that which had been previously deemed unclean to be cleaned by him. Peter's vision was a strong image that showed Peter the gospel was for all people. Previous barriers had been erased. The old understandings were passing away.

Did God change his mind about who was allowed in his presence? Nope. God has always been for all people and all places. Think back to the beginning, God made mankind in his image. Not just Israelites. God calls Abraham to be a blessing to all nations. God reaches out to Nineveh through Jonah. God uses Rahab and he used Ruth. The food restrictions were about identity. They were never about inclusion. They were about obedience not acceptance.

On the last night of his life, Jesus invited his disciples into an upper room where two important things happened. Jesus washed their feet and cleaned them as a symbol of his upcoming death on the cross. The very next day he was executed by the state, (Romans, by the way, carried out the execution) and he died a heinous death on a wooden cross. On the third day, he rose again, conquering sin and death, but on that night as he washed their feet, he said that all important phrase.

John 13:5-11

In verse 10, Jesus is not giving a hygiene lesson. He is making them clean. The cross is coming, and he is going to wash away their sins. Though they were stained as crimson, he would make them white as snow. At the end of the night, Jesus shared a meal with them, and he put a new spin on an old truth. You are what you eat. He took the bread and said, "This is my body broken for you," and he took the cup and said, "This is my blood spilled for you. Eat this and drink this in memory of me." You are what you eat. If you eat of my flesh and drink of my blood, you are my follower. If you allow me to clean you, if you put your faith in my death and resurrection, you are my follower.

The Ekklesia knows they are what they eat.

In this passage today, this is good news for Gentiles and it is good news for Cornelius, but it was also good news for Peter. Jesus was reminding him yet again of that truth he learned when Jesus washed his feet. In both that instance and in the vision of the sheet, Peter said, "Never." The implication was that Peter was still wrestling with the idea of maintaining his own cleanness. Even on the other side of the cross and the empty tomb, he was wrestling with this idea of cleanness. He had to be reminded again, do not call anything unclean that I have made clean. That was a message about food, but it was more a message about grace. Peter, you are what you eat, and if you dine on the body of Christ, that alone makes you clean. Your efforts are not enough. Your self-maintenance and self-sufficiency will get you nowhere fast.

A couple of questions for you to consider this week. 1) Are you still doing self-maintenance and cleanness? Are you trusting in your own ability or have you trusted in the meal that only Jesus can offer? Have you tasted and seen that he is good? 2) Are there people out there who are your Cornelius? Is there anyone out there who isn't clean enough for Jesus? Are there people out there you have written off or flat out avoided because they don't look like you, act like you or have the same values as you?

More than anytime in American history, you are what you eat, but there is also another interesting note. You are how you eat. Close to half of all Americans eat at least one meal by themselves a day. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it has some interesting components. The busyness of our modern world means more eating on the go, in the car, while shopping. It means eating at your desk. The advent of technology also has added to this phenomenon because you're not really alone if you have your phone in hand. Families' schedules are mismatched and friends live too far away, so single-serving meals are happening all around this country.

Eating alone is not just how we get sustenance. It means something. It is quite clear that our country is becoming more isolated, divided and polarized. We are how we eat. There is something powerful about sharing meals with people you love and with people you loathe. Those shared moments build empathy and grow compassion. Cornelius-type people move from enemies to friends over a nice meal. People you thought you were nothing like you turn out to be kind, interesting and fun people.

Don't forget that at the last supper of Christ, everyone was at the table. Judas was there, even though he would soon betray Jesus for a pocketful of cash. Peter was there, even though he would soon deny Jesus three times publicly. The rest of the disciples were there even though they would soon scatter like cowards when their Lord was taken. Jesus shared a table with them all. That's what grace looks like.

When it comes to the future and vision of this church, my prayer is that you always have an open chair at the table. Jesus' body was broken as bread and his blood was spilled as wine so we could invite everyone to the table. We don't get to say who is clean or unclean. We aren't in charge of the invitation list. At God's table, we are all ragged sinners in need of a savior. There are no outsiders and insiders. You are what you eat and you are how you eat. There is a reason that the most recurring metaphor for heaven is a feast. God is calling all his children to the table, and he wants to be sure that we always have a seat open.