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Acts 10:1-48
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Eating What is Set Before You

Growing up as a kid, I would have eaten almost anything. Except two things. Lima beans and liver. Yuck! I'm sure there were many nights when I sat at the table refusing to budge on either. And probably would still!

Now imagine the horror, my senior year of high school while I was an exchange student in France. My host mother served us her prized dish for our dinner. Not just liver. But liver tartar. Raw liver lightly seared on both sides.

Now I could have stuck to my guns and refused to eat it which would have no doubt greatly offended my host mother. But instead I chose to put aside my gastronomical preferences and graciously eat what was set before me. One crunchy bite at a time. Still yuck!

Fast forward some years and I am young naval officer in Singapore. Out to dinner with some buddies, we asked the restaurant host for a favorite local food. Hands down. Fish Head Curry Soup.

Has anyone had fish head curry soup before?

It's exactly as it sounds. A big bowl of curry with vegetables and a giant fish head staring right up at you. Our host explained that the best meat was located behind the fish's eye sockets. Now at first sight, one might think, "No Thank You!" But for those of us who committed to taking the first bites, we found that it was actually quite delicious. Imagine what we would have missed if we just simply turned our noses away and not tried something new.

At our house or at other people's houses, when our children are trying something new was ask them to take what we call a "no thank you bite." They must try it, because they may just like it. But if they don't, they simply say "no thank you" to more.

Throughout this sermon series, we've been talking about how mealtimes are special places where Jesus shows up and blesses us with his presence. It's a place where walls of division come crumbling down. Where God unites friends and foe and makes them family. A place where we find refuge and rest. And last week, thanks to Phil Hickok, we learned that mealtimes can also be a place where we gather strength and courage to face whatever challenges may ambush us down the road of life.

In our scripture today, we see how God uses the dinner table to point Peter toward a new reality that was created in Christ Jesus. That there should no longer

be dietary restrictions that separated Jews from Gentiles whereby hindering their ability to share in table fellowship.

Listen now to the Word of God as I read from The Message Acts 10:1-48 and we hear how God uses food to facilitate this amazing act of racial reconciliation.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There is a story in Luke when Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples into the places he was about to go. And he instructed them, “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, “The kingdom of God is near you.”¹ Did anyone catch that? Jesus said, “Eat what is set before you.” It had never struck me before how connected Jesus’ words were to our scripture text today. Apparently receiving the gifts that are offered to us is an important aspect of receiving the kingdom of God that is near us. Tuck that away for a moment.

I want to look today at two people in our scripture who come from completely different cultural contexts but how the same God was working through each of them. We will see how God uses food and table fellowship as a means to draw them together. We have Cornelius, a centurion through the Italian Regiment. And we have Peter, a Jew, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and a leader in the Church.

Let’s look at Cornelius first. We are told that he was a centurion in the Italian Regiment...a man who commanded a century of soldiers which numbered about eighty men. Centurions were carefully selected by the Roman officials because they provided stability throughout the Roman military system. Of those mentioned in the New Testament, each appear to have had noble qualities. Cornelius and his family, however, were set apart from the rest. They were devout, God-fearing, prayerful, and generous, giving regularly to those who were in need.

In other words, they believed in the same God as the Jews, attended synagogue and respected all the moral and ethical teachings of the Jews but did not fully embrace all of the Jewish customs, particularly the rite of circumcision.

The story goes that Cornelius was praying one day and had a vision from God. An angel appeared and told Cornelius to send for this guy named Peter who was staying with Simon the tanner, whose house was by the sea.

As for Peter, we know he was a disciple who learned directly from Jesus himself. He also was a devout Jew, meaning that he adhered to all the cultural laws that set them apart from others...especially kosher dietary laws from Deuteronomy which say, “You may eat any animal that has a split hoof divided in two and that chews its cud, fish that have scales and fins, clean birds which were not birds of

¹ Luke 10:8

prey or scavengers, and certain insects of the grasshopper family.”² Anything else was off limits!

The rationale as to why God deemed certain creatures as “clean” or “unclean” for dietary purposes has perplexed bible readers throughout the ages. The only satisfactory answer seems to be that it was a way of setting the Jewish people apart from their pagan neighbors. In other words to distinguish between us and them.

While Peter was praying to God on the roof top, he became hungry. And while he was waiting for his dinner he had a vision from God that turned his dining options upside down.

He saw something like a sheet being let down from heaven that contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds of the air. God said, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” In other words this new menu now included everything that he had previously known was off limits. Reptiles and pigs included!

Peter replied, “Surely not me Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

God says “Do not call anything impure that I have made clean.”

The one excuse that Peter had for not reaching out to his gentile neighbors was his strict dietary barrier. And now it was gone. He no longer had excuse for failing to develop relationships with people who were different from him.

What barriers do we sometimes put in the way of us developing relationships with people who are different from us? What if God were to remove them as quickly and simply as this one for Peter? How might that change our interactions with others?

As it was, God was not only paving the way for Peter to stay at the home of a gentile, but he was also setting a table where they could sit down as equals and break bread with one another.

Eating together is a leveling experience. Everyone has to eat. At the table, one is not better than another. We are two just human beings sharing a meal. Notice how Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet in reverence when Peter arrived. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said. “I am only a man myself.”

Author Leonard Sweet in his book, *From Tablet to Table, Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed*, describes how professional basketball players Magic Johnson and Larry Bird were fierce competitors in high school, then college, and eventually in the NBA. Johnson played for the LA Lakers and Bird played for the Boston Celtics. Apparently as their competitiveness grew so did their animosity for one another.

² Deuteronomy 14:3-21

“Somewhere along the way Converse paid each of them to shoot a shoe commercial; they faced each other on the court, Bird wearing white shoes, Johnson wearing black. Bird insisted that they film the commercial at his farm in Indiana. The shoot began icily, with both superstars circling each other, but when they broke for lunch and started to go their separate ways, Bird’s mother announced that she had made lunch and invited everyone to the table.

In Larry Bird’s words, ‘It was at the table that I discovered Earvin Johnson. I never liked Magic Johnson very much. But Earvin I like, a lot. And Earvin didn’t come out until I met him at Mom’s table.

That’s the power of the table: We lower our guard as we break bread together; we become ourselves, and we become open to one another. We cease being rivals, enemies; and we begin to experience companionship, friendship.”³

Tim Chester says, “The meal table is an opportunity to give up our proud ideals by which we judge others and accept in their place the real community created by the cross of Christ, with all its brokenness. It’s easy to love people in some abstract way and preach the virtues of love. But we’re called to love the real individuals sitting around the table.”⁴

As did the Roman Centurion and the Apostle Peter. Peter returned this hospitable love by sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with the Centurion and his entire household. The Holy Spirit came upon them all for even the Gentiles were speaking in tongues and praising God. So they were all baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And Peter stayed with them for a few days.

This one act paved the way for the Gospel reaching out to the entire Roman world! Jesus didn’t come just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles as well.

Now imagine the risk that Peter must have taken just going to the Centurion’s home in the first place. For a Jew to eat at a Gentile table would have made him unclean, let alone stay at their home. This was quite an act of vulnerability. Peter had to trust that God would take care of him even if he had to break his kosher diet in the process. Peter was utterly reliant upon the hospitality of his host to provide for him.

The same is true for us when ever we go over to eat at another person’s home. We trust that our hosts will provide us with good things. So we eat what is set before us as we are able...such as liver tartar...in order to receive the kingdom of God that is before us.

In two weeks, our Cascades Team will be traveling to Honduras where we will be guest of New Hope Opportunities and the Honduran people. There may be

³ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table, Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NAVPRES, 2014), 140-141.

⁴ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus, Discovering Grace, Community, & Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 48.

times when we are served things that we do not know or even care for. That's ok. We are to eat what we are served, as we are able, with a very gracious attitude, trusting that the Kingdom of God will be near and that the Holy Spirit will remove any cultural and language barriers between us and make us equals.

I want to close with a video that Bill Honey shared with me that beautifully shows the power of communal meals in our culture today. It begins with one woman's frustration with the isolating trap that technology lures us into today. And it ends with how she aims to solve that by simply inviting neighbors over to share a meal. Watch this...

Let us pray. Amen.

Acts 10 The Message (MSG)

Peter's Vision

10 1-3 There was a man named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, captain of the Italian Guard stationed there. He was a thoroughly good man. He had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God, was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer. One day about three o'clock in the afternoon he had a vision. An angel of God, as real as his next-door neighbor, came in and said, "Cornelius."

4-6 Cornelius stared hard, wondering if he was seeing things. Then he said, "What do you want, sir?"

The angel said, "Your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. Here's what you are to do. Send men to Joppa to get Simon, the one everyone calls Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is down by the sea."

7-8 As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two servants and one particularly devout soldier from the guard. He went over with them in great detail everything that had just happened, and then sent them off to Joppa.

9-13 The next day as the three travelers were approaching the town, Peter went out on the balcony to pray. It was about noon. Peter got hungry and started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket lowered by ropes at its four corners settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: "Go to it, Peter—kill and eat."

14 Peter said, "Oh, no, Lord. I've never so much as tasted food that was not kosher."

15 The voice came a second time: "If God says it's okay, it's okay."

16 This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies.

17-20 As Peter, puzzled, sat there trying to figure out what it all meant, the men sent by Cornelius showed up at Simon's front door. They called in, asking if there was a Simon, also called Peter, staying there. Peter, lost in thought, didn't hear them, so the Spirit whispered to him, "Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Get down there and go with them. Don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you."

21 Peter went down and said to the men, "I think I'm the man you're looking for. What's up?"

22-23 They said, “Captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man well-known for his fair play—ask any Jew in this part of the country—was commanded by a holy angel to get you and bring you to his house so he could hear what you had to say.” Peter invited them in and made them feel at home.

23-26 The next morning he got up and went with them. Some of his friends from Joppa went along. A day later they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had his relatives and close friends waiting with him. The minute Peter came through the door, Cornelius was up on his feet greeting him—and then down on his face worshiping him! Peter pulled him up and said, “None of that—I’m a man and only a man, no different from you.”

27-29 Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone who had come. Peter addressed them, “You know, I’m sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don’t do this—visit and relax with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. But now I’d like to know why you sent for me.”

30-32 Cornelius said, “Four days ago at about this time, midafternoon, I was home praying. Suddenly there was a man right in front of me, flooding the room with light. He said, ‘Cornelius, your daily prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God’s attention. I want you to send to Joppa to get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’s staying with Simon the Tanner down by the sea.’”

33 “So I did it—I sent for you. And you’ve been good enough to come. And now we’re all here in God’s presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us.”

34-36 Peter fairly exploded with his good news: “It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he’s doing it everywhere, among everyone.

37-38 “You know the story of what happened in Judea. It began in Galilee after John preached a total life-change. Then Jesus arrived from Nazareth, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, ready for action. He went through the country helping people and healing everyone who was beaten down by the Devil. He was able to do all this because God was with him.

39-43 “And we saw it, saw it all, everything he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem where they killed him, hung him from a cross. But in three days God had him up, alive, and out where he could be seen. Not everyone saw him—he wasn’t put on public display. Witnesses had been carefully handpicked by God

beforehand—us! We were the ones, there to eat and drink with him after he came back from the dead. He commissioned us to announce this in public, to bear solemn witness that he is in fact the One whom God destined as Judge of the living and dead. But we're not alone in this. Our witness that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the witness of all the prophets.”

44-46 No sooner were these words out of Peter's mouth than the Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on “outsider” non-Jews, but there it was—they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

46-48 Then Peter said, “Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did.” Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days.