

Who's Invited to the Table of the Lord?

Acts 11:1-18

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Jim was a sanitation engineer, a young man of around 30 years old who loved to go to church and wanted to serve the Lord. One day we were in conversation talking about ways he could serve in the church. He said to me he really would like to usher, but he didn't have a suit. He didn't need one for his job so he simply never got one. After speaking with a couple of the ushers they assured me that Jim would be welcomed with or without a suit and within a couple of weeks he was ushering. Jim eventually bought a suit but it was on his terms. He always felt welcomed at church and that event was pivotal in his spiritual development. Observing the whole event I knew that on his first Sunday, ushering in his flannel shirt, there were a few raised eyebrows, but it all passed by without any issues. I was very proud of that band of believers for their acceptance of people, as I am for this church for the same reason. For as we downplay our own biases, and we all have them, the love of Christ and the welcoming power of the gospel becomes evident.

The apostle Paul tells us in II Corinthians 5:20 that, "We are ambassadors for Christ; it is as though God is making His appeal through us."

As we gather at the Lord's Table this morning it is important for us to be thankful for Christ's invitation to us, as well as to encourage those who have been searching for the answers to life's questions.

In the 11th chapter of Acts, there is an incident that speaks to us about the nature of God's grace and how we are to demonstrate that grace to others. Peter, the apostle, found himself being unpopular, to say the least. Some of the Jews, thus part of the circumcised crowd, were non-plus about the fact that Gentile Christians (the uncircumcised crowd) were being given the red-carpet treatment by the Apostle Peter. Peter was actually breaking bread with them. The complaint registered was Peter's overlooking the dietary laws - you just don't eat with the uncircumcised - Peter should know better. What was really the issue at stake here was the threat of change, of breaking with tradition and perhaps that some of the new converts - these "goyim" might get better placement in the ecclesiastical pecking order.

So the first lesson or reminder in this passage that speaks to us has to do with always checking our motive for ministry. It begs each one of us to ask ourselves the question, how do we envision people who come into our lives? What is our attitude toward others, such as the unchurched person in our neighborhood who appears to look at us funny because we go to church on Sunday and don't sit on the back deck reading the newspaper? Or the person who walks into our sanctuary for the first time on a Sunday morning? Or perhaps the fellow employee who is of another denomination and disagrees with some of our theological premises? Do we ever allow our own biases or our own way of seeing things prevent us from seeing the big picture? The scripture reminds us that the angels rejoice when a single sinner repents. We must ask ourselves, "Do we?" Do we make an effort to reach out to or to understand the background of our unchurched neighbor or do we draw other conclusions? Do we see that person who walks into our sanctuary for the first time as another child of God or someone who is checking us out? Do we look for the spiritual essentials in conversation with that fellow employee or do we conduct our own spiritual litmus test? It is essential as ambassadors for Christ that we are constantly evaluating our motives for ministry.

A second reminder is that it is God's stadium; we are simply the players. Peter did not issue his defense on the basis of his wisdom, or his charisma or even his aptitude for having a forceful personality, rather he testified to the vision that he had received from the Lord. It was God who chose the people of Israel with whom he established his covenant. It was God who

sent his son in the fullness of time to earth for the “chosen people”, as well as the Gentiles to bring about his redemptive purposes. It was God in Christ who chose Peter, a roughneck fisherman to be his disciple and to establish his church.

What we learn is that the plans and boundaries of redemption are according to God's intentions not man's. The power of Peter's testimony was established in the fact that he had been inspired by the Holy Spirit to share his vision for ministry to the Gentiles, to the uncircumcised.

Think about Peter's life as a disciple. I've shared these points in recent sermons, and I do so now because they fit with today's text, but also if you're like me, sometimes when I hear something a few times it sinks in and I remember. Every time Peter acted in his own strength he experienced failure. He walks on water until he takes his eyes off the Lord. He cuts off the soldier's ear out of impulse. He denies the Lord three times out of fear. But in today's text he turns around the thinking of his misguided audience, and by verse 18 they are praising God for his testimony because it wasn't Peter's agenda, it was God's he was expounding by the inspiration of His Spirit.

Perhaps you say, “I wish I was bolder in sharing my faith with unbelievers. I wish I would be courageous in the face of injustice, I wish I was bolder about standing up to racism.” Who's directing the effort, the man or woman in the mirror, or the one who created the individual peering into that same mirror? Paul says we are ambassadors for Christ; ambassadors, not kings and queens.

The third reminder of today's text comes in verse 17 when Peter says, “If God gave them the same gift as he gave us.” The point is everyone is thirsty; everyone is in need of the grace of God. Or to put it another way, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Peter's words in the book of Acts are a great reminder to us that although God knows who will receive His offer of grace we do not, so, therefore we must treat everyone as being a potential believer. As Presbyterians we talk about being among “the elect” yet since only God determines the composition of that group we must be soul winners, not judge and jury.

Here is an important story that fleshes out that truth. “It was late in the 1960's, a time of great turmoil in our country. A man sporting long hair, a beard and some beads entered the sanctuary of a very traditional church. The other worshippers were all attired in their suits, dresses and Sunday finery. His patched jeans, tie-dyed shirt and fatigue jacket couldn't help but be noticed, along with his bandanna, rose colored glasses and the “peace” medallion hanging around his neck. He noticed the crowded pews and lack of seating space so he walked through the throng to the front of the church where he sat on the floor. Everyone noted that one of the elders was now also making his way to the front. The people were holding their breath in anticipation of what they guessed would be an ugly confrontation. You could almost hear their unspoken thoughts through the veil of tension. “What's that hippie doing here anyway? Look at the way he's dressed!” The elder approached the young man and without a word sat down on the floor to worship with him. That young man, who is now in the ministry, would later say I had tried all that my generation had to offer and found it empty. I remembered something in a song about Jesus being the one who would receive people just as they were; I wanted to see if it was true and if the church still believed it.”

Beyond these walls there are many who are spiritually hungry. You work with them, go to school to with them, and yes they live even in your neighborhood. And whether they realize or not they need to take a place at this table which is the Lord's Table. Here's the question, “Can you honestly say that you are doing all you can do to get them there?”