

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln
 September 27, 2009
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Acts 10:9-16

There's Room for Everyone

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.

¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

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

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

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Have you ever had a dream that was so real that it was hard to distinguish it from reality? You woke up and you weren't sure what was real and what wasn't? Perhaps you had a dream that caused you to change your mind. Mary and Joseph had dreams that caused them to accept Mary's pregnancy. Later, they had another dream to warn them not to go to Egypt.

When the Old Testament Joseph was sold into slavery, God gave him a special gift to interpret dreams and Egypt was saved from a great famine because of the interpretation of dreams. In today's text, the apostle Peter had a dream and later discovered that God's plan exceeded his own dream. God used a vision or a dream to influence Peter to broaden his acceptance of other people. See, God dreamt of a church where all people would be welcomed.

Since the beginning, God's dream was that all people would worship Him together with joy, regardless of gender, age, race, class, appearance, and all the marks that we use to include and exclude. God wanted to create a church, where, in the words of **Galatians 3:28**, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." God's dream for his church is inclusive. God didn't want there to be racial, class, or gender distinctions. God told our spiritual father, Abraham, "All peoples on earth shall be blessed through you"! (Gen. 12:3). I want you to remember that. God is crazy about you, and about each and every one of us. It doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, or what you've done.

However, leaders in the early church had great difficulty embracing the scope of God's dream. Church leaders in the New Testament allowed cultural prejudices to limit the membership of the church to a select group of people.

When the church first began in Acts 2, it started as an outgrowth of Judaism. The church that began at Pentecost was composed of people within Judaism who came to believe in Jesus. They limited their picture of the church to include only Jews. Yet, God's dream from the beginning was that from this one group, **everyone would be made aware of God's love**. Peter and other church leaders failed to grasp the dream. In an effort to reach only people like themselves, their dream was dwarfed.

Perhaps we should not be too hard on these narrow-minded church leaders, because each and every one of us here have our own prejudices. Some of us carry racial prejudice. Probably many more carry class prejudice. I have prejudices I'm not even aware of yet. See, prejudices sneak up on us. We tend to include or excluded on the basis of these non-essential characteristics in others. I don't mean our backgrounds are unimportant: they matter. But these things don't determine our worth or our eligibility for God's kingdom.

God's dreams are often limited by our cultural prejudice. It doesn't sound like a big deal for me to say that the first Gentile entered the church in Acts 10, because most of us are Gentiles and we don't rejoice or express regret when a Gentile comes to church. It seems normal. But in the first century this was a big deal! Acts 10:1–8 introduces us to a man names Cornelius. We know he was a centurion in the Italian Regiment. We also know that he was God-fearing and prayerful and generous with his gifts to the poor. God spoke to this Gentile Christian and told him to go meet with a man named Simon, called Peter. One of the things you may not immediately pick up on unless you're familiar with first-century culture is that there was a huge gulf between the Jews and Gentiles. The Jews hated the Gentiles, and the Gentiles returned the favor. For Cornelius to seek out Peter would have been unusual, except for the love of Christ that was in Cornelius' heart.

Among the Jews there was an exclusivism. They identified themselves as "God's chosen people." And as God's chosen people they forgot that their role was to bless all people. Instead of loving others, they hated them. For example, the Jews said that help should not be given to a Gentile woman in labor, because that would only bring one more Gentile into the world. They regarded the Gentiles as sinners and didn't want to be polluted by contact with them. Because they didn't understand God's dream they looked at Gentiles as the "enemy." They wouldn't eat with Gentiles. They wouldn't visit a Gentile home or allow Gentiles into their homes. And again, the Gentiles returned the favor.

We're talking about major prejudice. Talking about Cornelius is like telling a story about a Jew being received among Nazis or Palestinians; a Protestant among Catholics in Northern Ireland; a Muslim to a Bosnian Serb; a Turk among Greeks; or an African-American among the KKK. Isn't it interesting that you find these polarizations in all cultures. Prejudice is pervasive. It is deeply rooted. If we don't understand someone or are fearful of someone we distance ourselves from them. Then we see them as the enemy. Then we demonize them. And our distance amplifies the differences.

Cornelius is also described as “devout and God-fearing.” “He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” Here you get the idea that God thinks differently about this guy than those in the Church. Cornelius may have been hated among the Jews, but he had regular conversations with God. How can any one of us think another person or group is below us? But we do. This stuff runs deep in our veins and in our institutions. We have a tendency to want to be with people just like us. God’s dreams are limited by our own cultural prejudice. This is one of the sins for which we need to repent.

Dreaming God’s dream means valuing all people. God has larger dreams than we do. Just as God gave Cornelius a vision to demonstrate His love, God must now give Peter a vision. It takes a work of God to bring break down the walls of prejudice. The walls of prejudice are thick. The next day while Cornelius’s emissaries are on their way to see Peter, Peter goes up on his roof to pray. Roofs were flat, and because the city was crowded, people went up on their roofs to escape the crowds. Peter went there to pray. During this prayer time Peter became hungry, and God used Peter’s physical hunger to create a new kind of hunger, the hunger for reconciliation. God gave Peter a vision. In this vision, a large sheet came down from heaven. Peter saw all kinds of animals on this sheet, and God said, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” But Peter says, “I can’t eat. I’ve never eaten anything impure or unclean.” Peter knew that according to Leviticus 11 Jews could only eat animals which chewed their cud and had cloven hoofs. And Peter scrupulously observed the Jewish food laws. God replied, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”** It happened three times so that Peter could get the message. And the vision occurred just before Peter’s visitors came, so Peter would understand that God loves everyone—not just people like himself. You will notice that God prepared the way for Cornelius to go. God prepared Peter to hear the message and receive the greeting from Cornelius.

In the book of Acts, God made it clear that He wanted His people to reach out into Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and the uttermost parts. But his people stayed in Jerusalem. What happens? Persecution comes to the church. Listen to Acts 8:2: **“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”** Where did God want them to go? “Judea and Samaria.” But the church didn’t want to go there. But when the persecution came, they had to go there. Yet when they got there, they were reluctant to reach out, and God had to remind them to reach out to those who were different.

Here is another Dream that sounds familiar to us: **“I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. . . . I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”** That was MLK Jr. Yet, in a Teamwork Magazine article, “Chasing the Dream: The daily quest for reconciliation in an alienated world,” writer Rick Knox says, **“Today, decades later, many of this nation’s 30 million African-Americans still feel oppressed.”** When will the dream finally be realized? The answer is: When the church believes and practices the principles of Acts 10. Our church is positioned to fulfill this

dream of diversity so well. We live in a neighborhood of rich and poor and a neighborhood of many different kinds of people.

In Acts 10:34 Peter says: **“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”** There is a basic application here: **Do what Peter did and widen your circle of unlikely friends.** How are we supposed to do this? Here is a thought: ***Identify a group of people you have shut out of your life.*** Sometimes we don't regard ourselves as prejudiced, but prejudice has a way of sneaking up on us. We have to deal with our prejudices. For some, it will be treating people in other faith groups with respect and dignity; or respecting people who are overweight, or the rich or poor.

Something else we need to strive for is to ***Examine your reasons for our prejudice.*** (*illogical as they may be*). For some of us, the reason may be that we were taught by our parents to exclude a particular group. For others, it may be that we had a bad experience with people from a different background. I know that each one of here has an idea of what we think is the worst kind of sin. But isn't it interesting how we have our own ways of calculating and establishing the degrees of sin. Some people may be sleeping around, and we say, “That's what people do nowadays.” People have affairs and say, “I only slipped once.” We see people neglecting their families and excuse it by saying people are under a great deal of pressure. We make excuses for our own greed, pride, or stubbornness? How can we look at a group and say their sin is the sin God really hates and then ignore our own sin?

I have an idea that when God looks down, he sees it all as *sin*. We need to find ways to confess it to one another. If we can't bring our brokenness to the church, where can we bring it?

Remember Jesus' story of the woman caught in adultery? He did not say to her, “I pronounce you innocent.” He didn't say, “don't worry about it, other people sin too.” That story is one about the hypocrisy of religious people. And too often we become the ones pointing fingers at others without considering our own sin. I could preach a whole other sermon on the idea of judgmentalism. I don't think God intends for us to remain silent when someone is destroying their life just so we can be non-judgmental. If we love and care for someone, we will try to help them. If someone we know is drinking heavily and appears to have a drinking problem, would it be the kind and right thing to do to remain silent? Of course not. Let me suggest that our motive should always be TO LOVE. That is what it means to EXAMINE OUR REASON. Why are we critical? Why are we vocal about someone else's behavior. Is it merely to criticize or is it to help someone find wholeness and recovery?

God wants the church – you and me - to be the catalyst for change in the lives of people. He wants us to accept others so that they can experience the love of Christ and what it means to be part of a loving church.