

May 5, 2019 – (Easter 3, Peter and Cornelius)

Sermon Text – Acts 10:1-17, 34-35

- Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane"...Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. -

During the past three years, our confirmation students have read and studied many Bible stories. In preparing their statements of faith, I have asked them to choose one of those stories, or a verse or two from one of them, that speaks to them in a special way. They were to then use their choice to interpret for us how they see themselves fitting into God's story. We still have two students from whom we have not yet heard, so we will hear their statements now...

If I had asked the same question of the disciples, I wonder if they could have answered as easily. Of course, they didn't have as much scripture from which to choose. The New Testament hadn't been written yet, and the Old Testament only had the Law and the Prophets. But I wonder about Peter. How does he fit into God's story? Good question. Of all the disciples, he's probably the most up and down of any of them. One moment, he fits perfectly. He's got everything figured out and his place is just right. The next, he's completely on the outside. Everything is wrong, and he can't possibly think of the right thing to say. Think about it. Peter is the guy who jumps out of the boat when he sees Jesus walking on the water. He's fine. He can do it...until he thinks about it. Then, the wind and the waves become too scary. He sinks and Jesus has to grab hold of him and lift him back into the boat. He's the guy who answers correctly when Jesus asks what people are saying about him. Peter knows. He says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus rewards him by declaring that its that kind of faith on which he is going to build the church. But, when Jesus goes on to talk about his eventual suffering, Peter says, "God, forbid it, Lord. This should never happen to you!" And Jesus has to tell him to get out of the way and stop being a hindrance. "Get behind me, Satan," says Jesus, pointing out that Peter is acting like Jesus' greatest enemy. And he's the guy who pledges his steadfast loyalty to Jesus,

even unto death, who denies him three times before the light of the very next day. But Peter has a special place. When the Day of Pentecost arrives, and with it the gift of the Holy Spirit, it's Peter who stands up and preaches the sermon that results in the baptism of three thousand people. He has it all together again. He's on top of the world.

And then, we hear that he has a peculiar vision. He's hungry, waiting for lunch, and a sheet filled with all kinds of creatures descends from heaven. A voice invites him to grab something and eat. But Peter's not ready for that. He knows that many of the birds and animals included on the sheet are unclean. They are not to be eaten. He says, "By no means, Lord...I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." He's not going to start now. But the voice says to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." "What's that all about?" Peter wonders. He doesn't get it. So, God does it again. Sends the sheet down from heaven. There are all the creatures, clean and unclean. Peter can eat what he likes, but he's not going to change things too fast. God has to do it a third time. And that only leaves him more puzzled than before. Fortunately, God has arranged a little demonstration to help him figure it out.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, needs his help. He's had a vision too. An angel has told him to send for Peter. Peter, still confused about his own vision, goes. Now Cornelius was a "God-fearing man," who was generous with his money and cared for the poor. But he was not a Jew. He was not part of the chosen people. He was "unclean" according to their understanding of God's law. Peter should not have gone to his house, nor should he have associated with him in any way. But Peter has had his vision, and now he is beginning to understand its meaning. When he arrives at Cornelius' house, he explains, "You...know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So...I came without objection." And when he discovers that Cornelius wants to hear the good news of Jesus, Peter begins to teach him and all the people who have assembled in his household. And he begins with the statement with which our reading for today ends, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." That's a big insight for Peter to admit. And when Cornelius and those with him begin to exhibit the signs of the Holy Spirit, Peter orders them baptized. Gentiles can be believers too, and Peter is the first to recognize that fact. The good news is now ready to be carried to the ends of the earth. Oh, Peter isn't perfect. He'll suffer a relapse in due time, refusing to eat the food offered to him by Gentiles, and offending another of the young church's missionaries, Paul, in the process, but we'll leave that for another day.

The point for you, dear confirmands, as you affirm the promises of your baptism and are confirmed by the church this morning, is that you are never done learning, nor will you ever be able to say that you know perfectly the place you have in the story of God's people. Being a Christian doesn't work like that. We are always being shaped and formed by our encounters with God's word and with God's people. And God is always calling on us to a process of reflection and response to the presence of Jesus in our lives. That's what happens when we serve a resurrected and living Lord. He calls us to an active and dynamic relationship, that is always moving us to greater understanding and deeper levels of commitment as we choose to serve him in our lives. It may seem simple to you this morning. All you have to do is repeat one line. And at rehearsal I put all the responsibility on Chaden to memorize it for the rest of you. "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me." If he gets it right, the rest of you should be able to get it too! But, it's really a whole lot more than that. "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me." That's a commitment that invites God to continue to be active in your life, as one who is there to bug you and bother you with new ideas and lead you and direct you into new ways of living and acting in the world.

This past week, we lost an important voice in the church when Rachel Held Evans died at age 37. She was not a pastor. And she wasn't a seminary professor. She was a woman who thought deeply about her Christian faith and wrote clearly about her ideas. Many of my pastor friends have been posting pieces of her wisdom to Facebook in the past few days. One of them seems to fit what I'm talking about. She writes: "This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy, or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more." As much as you might wish it, this is not the end. You and God, you have a long way to go yet. So, buckle up, this is going to be a wild and crazy ride! And, I believe, you will do great and wonderful things!

Amen.