

Acts 10:34

"God's Not Partial"

In a moment I am going to play a song for y'all. The lyrics to this song are on an insert in your bulletin. Please read along as the song plays.

(Play "Revelation" by Third Day)

Songwriters: Arthur Taylor Lee / John Echols / Bryan Maclean / Ken Forssi

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(Begin with prayer asking God for a revelation in this morning's sermon.)

"So Peter opened his mouth and said: Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

This is a familiar story. In the first part of Acts 10 Peter and the other Apostles have been persecuted and run out of Jerusalem. Peter was staying in the home of a tanner in Joppa. Some of you may remember Joppa is the same port town where Jonah disobeyed God and boarded a ship for Tarshish. Dinner time rolls around in Joppa and Peter becomes hungry. While they are fixing dinner Peter goes up to the roof to pray and falls into a trance. Peter sees a vision of a sheet being brought down from heaven by the corners.

"in it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice a second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven" (Acts 10:12-16).

Peter did not understand what this means. My Bible says Peter was inwardly perplexed. Given everything we know about Peter I believe that's too fancy a way to put it. It might be better to say Peter was stumped; just stumped. Peter had good reason to be confused. Way back in Leviticus 11 there is a whole long passage with a list of the animals that are clean and unclean which the Jews are not to eat or even touch. In Peter's vision the sheet is filled with unclean animals. Why would God go back on God's own command saying, "Rise, Peter; Kill and eat," animals which are clearly unclean and prohibited by the Law of Moses? When we consider Peter's confusion over God's contradictory command it's a wonder Peter doesn't try to board a ship and sail for Tarshish himself.

About that time three men come to see Peter. Jonah was in the belly of a fish for three days. Could there be a connection? These three men are the servants of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. Let's take a moment to be very clear about what is going on here. The Romans control the Promised Land and much of the Ancient Near East. In general Roman soldiers take advantage of the Jews by bullying and extorting money from the people. Plus, the Romans are Gentiles. Gentiles are anybody who is not a Jew. God told the Israelites to put to the sword every man, woman and child who was not an Israelite when it was time for Israel to take possession of the Promised Land. Many years later, after Israel had been scattered for disobedience and allowed to return to the Promised Land, Ezra and Nehemiah made the people get rid of their foreign wives. During Jesus' day good Law abiding Jews actually avoided traveling through the land of the Samaria because they were Gentiles. When Jesus sends out the twelve disciples Jesus tells the twelve, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans" (Matt 10:5). And yet here are three men, sent from a Roman Centurion — a leader of 100 Roman soldiers — who are asking Peter to come with them to Caesarea to see their master Cornelius. (pause) Boy, I tell ya. If Peter had been Jonah, there would have been a Jonah shaped whole in the door as Jonah ran the other way.

Peter does what Jonah did not do. Peter does not run away. Peter goes with the men, and upon entering the home of the Roman Centurion Peter says these words;

"You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me" (Acts 10:28-29). Cornelius then tells Peter how four days ago he and his house were praying when an angel of the Lord appeared to them saying, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside" (Acts 10:31-32). Peter proceeds to share with those gathered in the Centurion's home the gospel of Jesus Christ. While Peter is speaking, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God" (Acts 10:46). Then Peter baptized everyone in the household. (pause) Truly, God shows no partiality.

Sisters and brothers the verse, "God shows no partiality," has been stepping on my toes for over a year now. I think it is because of what is happening in our denomination. On February 19th there will be a called session of the General Conference and they will make a decision about homosexual marriage and the ordination of homosexual clergy. I am like Peter in that I am totally confused. In the United Methodist Church when we don't understand what God is doing we are to follow four basic steps to wrestle it out. These steps are referred to as the Wesley Quadrilateral, and they are **Scripture, Tradition, Experience** and **Reason**. The Bible is clear. Homosexuality is a sin. Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 clearly state that homosexuality is a sin. The tradition of the church has been to say that homosexuality is a sin and to condemn homosexuals. The Social Principles located in the 2016 United Methodist Book of Discipline state, "Homosexuality is not in keeping with Biblical teaching." Here's where I get stumped.

Several years ago now I participated in a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education or C.P.E. at CMC University. While there the hospital hired a female chaplain. She is an ordained pastor in a smaller Baptist denomination — certainly not Southern Baptist. In that denomination they ordain women and homosexuals. The chaplain the hospital hired is an openly practicing homosexual. (pause) I didn't like it. I knew what the Bible says, and I didn't like it. However, I needed the unit of C.P.E. so I decided to keep my mouth shut and watch. (pause) I know what y'all are thinking. (pause) He never keeps his mouth shut. How did he pull that off? (pause) I wanted to see how this woman could be an ordained pastor and an openly practicing homosexual. Like the circumcised who accompanied Peter from Joppa to Caesarea I was amazed at the way the Holy Spirit worked through her. I was amazed at the way the Holy Spirit used her to reach out to the patients in the hospital and to stand beside the doctors and staff for the patients. She could sit with the patients in those awkward moments in ways I struggled. It was plain to me God was using her as an instrument of God's will through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The problem is I am stumped. The Bible is clear. Homosexuality is a sin. (pause) What is God doing with this? (pause) God is not just stepping on my toes, I am afraid God is going to break my toes clean off. I am stuck between two stubborn guys; Jonah and Peter. I am not where Jonah is. I am not ready to shun and reject all homosexuals because they are not obeying God's Law the way I think they should. I am not where Peter is. I am not ready to openly accept homosexuals for ordination and marriage. I do believe homosexuality is a sin. However, thanks to Leviticus 11:1-8, so is eating pork BBQ, and I love pork BBQ. Thanks to Leviticus 19:19 it is a sin to wear clothing made from two different kinds of materials. How many folks here are wearing shirts that are a cotton-polyester blend? Why is it so hard to find pants these days that do not have spandex woven in? What's up with that? And what about the Ten Commandments? How many folks here, myself included, keep a Sabbath's day to rest (Exodus 20:8)? By rest I do not mean mow the lawn, get caught up on laundry, or trying to complete our, "honey do," list. I mean an honest day of rest spent in prayer and study of God's Word. How many people here work on Sunday? How many of us truly put God first over our jobs, or golf, or NASCAR, or Panther football, or college football, or basketball or tailgating (Exodus 20:3)?

Okay. Okay. Maybe I am getting a little carried away. Thanks to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 Gentile Christians (that's us) are not held to all 644 commandments of the Old Testament. There the Apostle's gave a lesser decree which in the New King James reads like this, "Therefore, I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:19-20). That being said, we are not given the authority to pick and choose to which Old Testament commandments we can hold others accountable.

As I continue to wrestle with this subject Peter's words come back to step on my toes. God is not partial. God is not partial. When Jesus gives the great commission He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20, RSV). When Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment Jesus does not offer the laws against homosexuality. Actually, Jesus never talks about homosexuality in the gospel. The closest Jesus comes to dealing with sexual immorality is the episode of the woman caught in adultery. Church, do you remember what Jesus asked the crowd? "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7, ESV). When the crowd leaves Jesus tells the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11, ESV). God is not partial to this woman, or to the sinners who sought to condemn both Jesus and the woman. Jesus simply says, Go, and sin no more.

When Jesus is asked the question, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:36-39, RSV). Here Jesus is quoting Old Testament laws from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and according to Jesus these are the most important two and the food laws and the laws opposing homosexuality must serve these two first. Jesus goes on to step on our toes even more when Jesus gives us a new moral commandment we must all follow. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34).

As to the question why would God the Holy Spirit seem to throw out laws regarding clean and unclean food, and the intermixing with Gentiles I have a theory. I think God is working back to God's basic plan, and it was time for a change. Kind of like an NFL coach going into the locker room at half time and changing the play because the other team has figured them out. God's plan is to win. God's plan is to restore all of creation to the way it was before the Fall. God promised Eve her descendants will not always fall to temptation. God promised Noah, God would not destroy sin by flood again. God promised Abraham, "Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). Did you catch that? All the nations. Not the white nations, or the black nations, or the Hispanic nations, or the rich people, or the poor people, or the straight people or the gay people. God shows no partiality. Jesus said make disciples of all nations. Jesus shows no partiality. Honestly, some days God's command absolutely steps on my toes. (pause) But then I remember God did not create me so God could be my Santa Claus and fulfill my wishes. God created me to be His servant, and equipped me – equipped us all to find greatest joy and pleasure if we will return to God and do what God asks – even when we don't understand: even when we do not agree. (pause) How is that for an epiphany?

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen