

Scripture: Acts 10:9-16 (NRSVA)

9 About noon the next 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 it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. **11** He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. **12** In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. **13** Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ **14** But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ **15** The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ **16** This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Sermon: Is This Seat Really Open?

I remember as a child sitting at our dinner table as we ate. We were what was considered a normal household in the 1990s. There was my dad, mom, my brother, and I. There were four seats at our table. Our table was full. If we had a guest my parents would either add a chair or if we had several guests, we would put in the leaf that came with the table to make our table bigger. With the leaf we could add several more people. Yet, rarely did we have an empty seat at the table. Those at the table were expected. I wonder if we would have openly welcomed an unexpected guest.

Our scripture, today, is kind of a strange one out of context. Peter, as we may remember, was one of Jesus’s apostles, perhaps the most important one. He was of Jewish descent, which meant he was considered a shoe-in for Jesus’s ministry, unlike his Gentile (non-Jewish) counterparts. When Jesus died, Peter knew that the teachings of Jesus needed to be spread, and so he concentrated himself on those who were similar to him, those of Jewish descent. He believed that Gentiles were not part of God’s plan and were unclean in the eyes of God.

When we read our scripture, we joined Peter as he traveled to a man named Cornelius, who was a Roman officer. This meant that Cornelius was not Jewish, yet in his introduction, Cornelius was presented as one who was devoted to the Jewish/Christian God. In the context of this story, Cornelius had been told by God to go get Peter, and that was all that was said. Before Peter was approached to go to Cornelius, he separated himself to pray up on a roof top.

God uses us in all our states, even in our hunger. So for God's illustrative point, Peter received a vision about food. And much like others, his vision initially left Peter completely confused.

The purpose of this vision? God was trying to help Peter understand the missional importance of reaching the "unclean" Gentiles, so that they could know they were and are a part of God's redeeming blessings. If we were to continue in Acts, we would see that after God's revelation to Peter, Peter spoke to other Jewish-Christian believers and said, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us...who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17) What beautiful words from Peter! Here the words again, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us...who was I that I could hinder God?"

Two weeks ago, I sang highlights from "Be Our Guest", famously known because of Disney's 1991 cartoon film "Beauty and the Beast". Within that quirky dish dance number, there are many aspects of hospitality at the dinner table. While our eyes enjoy the artistry of the dancing and showmanship, our ears hear an illustration of a truly open table. Remember, the dishes had not known Belle for very long before they welcomed her to their best. Belle is invited to relax, sit, and enjoy the company and yummy food. The characters even present Belle with a challenge, "Put our service to the test."

What if we lived like that?

God's table is a place of great diversity. Take a deep look at the picture on our screen. This piece of artwork entitled "The Best Supper" by Jan Richardson gives us a visualization of many aspects of God's table. It shows us the diversity of skin and hair color, clothing, culture, gender, potentially even sexual orientation. There are different kinds of breads symbolizing different walks in life or cultures. Friends, notice, there is even a cat at the table. Notice that some have wine, and some have soda. Each plate is different as well. This art reminds us that at the table there should be no hierarchy, but equal representation. Also notice that the table is stuffed as full as it can go with people and animals. While we search for ways to open up our table more, this table showcases what it means to live into being at God's table.

We are called to be a diverse family. That means that...

We are called to be welcoming the person with lower or higher socioeconomic status. Yes. I'm talking about the poor and the rich.

We are called to be welcoming the person whose biology does not reflect who God created them to be on the inside. Yes. I'm talking about transmen and transwomen.

We are called to be welcoming the person regardless of who they call their partner. Yes. I'm talking about our LGBTQ+ siblings.

We are called to be welcoming the person who moves and lives differently than we do. Yes. I'm talking about the disabled and those who are differently-abled.

We are called to be welcoming the person whose scars and hurts we cannot see. Yes. I'm talking about those abused.

We are called to be welcoming the person who believes differently than we do.

We are called to be welcoming the person who understands God differently than we do.

We are called to be welcoming the person who has found addiction to be their only sense of safety.

We are called to be welcoming the person who has a different skin color than us.

We are called to be welcoming the person who speaks a different language than us.

We are called to be welcoming the person who seeks safety in us from danger in their lives or a better life than what they have. Yes. I'm talking about immigrants.

We are called to be welcoming the person who I have not listed.

Last year we finished a project that allowed for people in wheelchairs to be able to use a bathroom in our building. (It's not the only purpose of that bathroom, but it certainly makes a statement about how we are supporting others.) We as a church are making an effort through support of the greater United Methodist Church as well as our own passions to help people outside of our building feel the welcoming nature which Jesus so desperately wants from us.

Friends, I want to challenge us this week. May we ask ourselves: Who are we leaving out at our table, purposefully or unpurposefully? Why are we doing it? How can we change it? And then, let's change it.

For at God's table, all are welcome. Amen.