

WHAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN

ACTS 11:1-18

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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This morning, I want to talk about identity. How many different ways do you identify yourself?

I did a bit of a personal inventory this week. Here are a few of the ways that I identify myself:

- Christian
- husband
- father
- son
- brother
- friend
- pastor
- writer
- reader
- Anabaptist (formed in the MB tradition; time spent in MC world as well)
- coach
- athlete (at least in my own mind—still soldiering on in hockey, squash, soccer...)
- music enthusiast
- introvert

That's a quick list. Others, perhaps, might use different—possibly even less flattering words!—to identify me, too. 😊

A quick glance at the list and it's obvious that these identifiers don't all carry the same weight. I don't attach as much significance to the fact that I'm a rock music fan as I do to the fact that I am a father, for example.

If we were to think of our identities as something like an archer's target, some of these descriptors would be at the center of who I understand myself to be and how I present myself as to the outside world, and some would be represented by the rings on the periphery.

What about you? What words do you use?

When someone says, "tell me about yourself" or "what do you do?" what do you say?

You can tell a lot about someone by how they choose to identify themselves. You can tell a lot about someone by which words go in the bulls-eye and which ones are more on the outer rings.

The theme of "identity" runs throughout our story this morning, as we'll see.

Our text is actually a summary of the events of Acts 10. Peter is defending himself before the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem for eating with Gentiles.

He tells an abbreviated version of the story in the text that was read for us this morning, but I'll be drawing on elements from the whole story in my sermon.

So, if you hear something and think, "I didn't hear anything about that in the Scripture reading!" just go back and read Acts 10.

I want to draw three implications out of the whole story of Acts 10-11. All three points deal with themes of identity, but the last one is most explicit.

1. Welcome of the "unclean" outsider

Cornelius was, obviously, a Gentile.

And Peter's first words when he arrives at his residence make it clear that the divide between the two groups remained huge.

In Acts 10:27-28:

... he went in and found that many had assembled; **28** and he said to them, “You yourselves 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.

Try that kind of a greeting next time you get invited to someone’s house. 😊

Peter was a Jew, Cornelius was a Gentile. And not just any Gentile, but a *Roman soldier*. While it seems from 10:1 that Cornelius was about the best of the Roman soldiers, he still represented a category of people that pious Jews would have kept themselves rigidly separate from.

And yet, Peter has seen this strange vision while his stomach was rumbling waiting for lunch on a rooftop in Joppa.

He had seen all kinds of animals being lowered on a sheet—all kinds of lunch options that were forbidden for human consumption by the Torah, the Law of Moses (see Leviticus 11 for an exhaustive list).

In what he could only have initially assumed was a perverse joke, he had heard a voice saying, “Peter, kill, eat!”

He had responded as any good Jew would have: “Surely not!”

And then he had heard the astonishing words that he now spoke to his Gentile hosts: “do not call anything impure that God has called clean!”

We know the story from here, right? Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his household; they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, just like the first believers at Pentecost; they are baptized.

They are welcomed as full equals and members into the family of faith.

Resurrection means that “outsiders” become “insiders” and all are welcomed in!

Resurrection means that the least likely candidates for citizenship in the kingdom (from our perspective) are bumped to the front of the line by God.

Who are the “unclean” people in our context? What categories of people do we find it difficult to imagine sharing a meal with?

2. Resurrection means—surprise!

It’s worth reading Acts 10 in its entirety. When we do, it becomes clear that for most of the story, Peter has no idea what’s going on!

He has his strange vision while his stomach is rumbling on the roof, but he’s still puzzling over what it means when Cornelius’s men show up (he asks them why they’ve come in 10:21).

All *they* tell him is that their master has *also* had a vision and that they’re supposed to facilitate a rendezvous.

So off he goes.

Even when he arrives at Cornelius’s house, he still doesn’t seem to know what’s up!

I saw this vision and God said I’m not supposed to call anything unclean that God has made clean... so here I am... Why have you sent for me?

Cornelius tells him about his vision and then, it seems, the penny drops for Peter.

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

The story is full of surprise at every turn.

It is perhaps surprising that a Roman centurion is devout and God-fearing and praying to God. Apparently God of Israel is at work beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community and the growing community of Jesus’ followers!

Peter's vision is surprising to put it mildly. Heaven opening, the voice of God, the sheet, the animals...

The whole parallel vision thing is surprising—both men having experiences with the same God who is bringing them together to change the course of the church, yet having no idea what is going on with the other!

And, of course, the greatest surprise of all. Gentiles being allowed in!

I can imagine Peter kind of shrugging his shoulders in front of the Jewish Christians who are interrogating him for his violation of Jewish norms. *What could I say or do? I hardly knew what was going on most of the time! I was kind of just getting dragged along for the ride? I wasn't looking for this. I didn't even really want the Gentiles to be welcomed in, truth be told.*

But who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?

God is full of surprises.

Are we open to the ways in which God might be at work in unexpected ways and unexpected people? Or do we assume that God mostly operates within the confines or right-thinking, right-behaving people (like us)?

3. Resurrection means a reconfiguring of identity

We started by talking about identity, and that's where I want to end today as well. How we understand ourselves—as human beings, as Christians—is so vitally important!

Near the center of the bulls-eye of how Peter understood himself would have been his Jewish identity.

We must not forget that even though Peter was a disciple of Jesus, in these early days the Jesus movement is primarily a Jewish movement.

They were still sorting out what it all meant—how ethnicity and the Jewish law worked with their new identity in Jesus Christ.

(And it would take some time. The Apostle Paul would face this battle in a number of the churches he founded. Some of his strongest opponents—some of the people he most urgently spoke out against in his letters to the churches—were those who taught that being a faithful follower of Jesus meant embracing circumcision or other Jewish markers of identity.)

Peter was a good Jew. Peter had followed Torah his whole life. His identity had been shaped by these practices, these dietary laws, these customs, these commands this peculiar people that he was a part of.

It's difficult to overstate what a huge leap this would have been for Peter to make.

The vision that he saw on the rooftop in Joppa would have called into question some of the core convictions of how he understood himself in relation to others, some of the most basic practices and beliefs that oriented him in the world.

And yet, despite the fact that he likely felt like the ground underneath his identity was shifting, Peter stepped out in faith and allowed the risen Christ to reconfigure his own self-understanding.

He put into practice what he had earlier proclaimed in front of the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:30-32):

“We must obey God rather than human authority.”

Even when that meant setting aside the things he thought he knew about himself, about God, and about what God wanted in order to embrace something new!

What about us?

To be good listeners of this text, we need to put ourselves in Peter's place and ask ourselves an equally hard question.

What identity do we cling to so tightly that the embrace and the call of Christ has a hard time getting through?

Our identities may not have been formed by restrictive dietary laws or ethnic traditions, but each and every one of us has aspects of our identity that have been formed and

shaped by the culture and communities we are a part of rather than by Christ and his kingdom.

What narratives about who *we* are and how *we* orient ourselves to the world might need to be resisted and brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ?

One of the most powerful narratives of identity out there right now is what some sociologists call “the authenticity narrative.”

In a few weeks, my brother Gil is going to be here in Lethbridge doing a workshop on some of these themes. Here’s what he has observed in a decade or so of teaching young adults in a bible college context:

But what became increasingly obvious to me over the years was that there was another “script” that was informing how many of them saw themselves. I recognized it in them; I recognized it in myself. The script that has been summarized as the authenticity narrative. Many of them wouldn’t have known this term. Most of them wouldn’t be able to describe the script. But it is part of the cultural air we breathe.

The story’s protagonist is the unique individual. The central problem facing this person is a world that seeks to repress that uniqueness. The solution is for the individual to look within and find an essential “self,” and then find the courage to embrace it. Once that self is discovered, it needs to be affirmed, nurtured and eventually externalized into the broader world. In our more honest moments, we have to admit that this self is often a bit idealized. It’s been touched-up a bit so that it will play well on Facebook. But it’s still identifiably *us* and it offers an identity, a purpose, and even a touch of heroism as we resist the forces of conformity and chart our own paths.¹

This isn’t the *only* narrative out there that seeks our allegiance.

But it is a powerful one. It is one that our kids marinate in daily. It is one that is enormously attractive and that our media feeds constantly.

¹ Gil Dueck, unpublished article.

Is it possible that *this* narrative, this self-understanding, this way of understanding ourselves in the world might need to be reoriented and reconfigured?

We should pay careful attention to the ending of our passage this morning.

The Jerusalem apostles and disciples are convinced by Peter's story and are persuaded that God has, indeed, welcomed the Gentiles into the fold. Notice what they say:

When they heard this [Peter's story about his experience with Cornelius], they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the **repentance** that leads to life."

It's tempting—*very* tempting—to make Acts 11:1-18 say something like, "Look, clearly there are no more boundaries, God welcomes one and all as they are!"

And this is true.

But embedded within that word "repentance" is the non-negotiable call for *all*, whatever their ethnicity or gender or social status or any other designation we can think of, to turn *away* from what used to ground their identity and *toward* the way of Christ.

This text does say that all are incredibly, gloriously welcome at the table of the Lord.

But it also points to the fact that all are now given the gift and the task of walking *differently*, seeking together to be conformed to the image of Christ.

Acts 10-11 is not the New Testament's equivalent of a John Lennon "Imagine" moment where everyone comes together and realizes that there never really was anything worth fighting over and that all of our distinctions were meaningless.

The Jewish followers of Jesus and the Gentile followers of Jesus do not just bring their old identities to the table and say, "thank God that we can now just see that each of our stories is unique and special in its own way and now Jesus has shown us that we should love and tolerate one another."

This is a common narrative—and a popular one—in our day. But I don't think it is what this story teaches us.

This is not the part of the story where our various individual narratives and identities take centre stage; rather it is where they are brought together in the embrace of Christ, relocated into his story, and set off on a different trajectory.

All people—Jew, Gentile, slave free, male, female and every other category we can think of—are given the gift of repentance.

And it is a gift.

We are given the gift of laying our identities and the burden of creating and maintaining them down at the foot of the cross, and grounding them in something far more durable and secure than anything we can come up with on our own.

We are given the gift of, together, imitating Christ, who did not cling to his status or rights, his very divine identity, but rather, as it says in Philippians 2, *emptied* himself.

So may we, as his followers, follow his pattern.

May we empty ourselves rather than exalting ourselves, as we walk with Jesus proclaiming the glorious good news.

All are welcome. All are accepted. All are forgiven. And all are called to step out into new creation in imitation Christ.

Together, as equals.

Thanks be to God.

