

Sermon Text for May 26, 2019

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Genesis 13:14-18, Ephesians 4:1-6, Acts 10:9-16

"When did loving Jesus stop being enough?"

Have you ever noticed that different people follow rules and regulations in varying degrees from other people? I know my girls each had their own way of following rules. One daughter would obey and if there is a question in her mind as to whether she is doing what she is supposed to be doing she will stop and ask before going any further. Another daughter may disobey but when she is told she will completely steer clear of even getting close to disobeying and do something altogether different so she won't get into trouble.

Now another daughter you had to tell her precisely what she could and could not do. You told her not to play in the mud by the swing set and you would find her playing in the mud in the garden. You gave her one set of rules and she would discover exactly where the line was that if you took it literally and to the letter she would be following the rules.

With rules and regulations there has continuously been an age old debate between following the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Which one are you? Are you more the letter of the law type person or a spirit of the law person? How about in your faith, in your walk with God are you more of a letter of the law type person with the danger of always trying to find fault in the other person who may have broken a certain law of the faith that you consider crucial, or are you a spirit of the law type person always walking that fine line of being in danger of saying that anything goes and there are no absolutes and everything is relative? And is it enough to say today as we live out our faith that all that counts is that you love Jesus.

Well Peter was a classic letter of the law type person. If it's written in the book then I'm going to do that, otherwise I would be disobeying God. Peter could not imagine disobeying God even if God told him to.

Today in this Scripture God gives Peter, he gives the early church, he gives us a new way of looking at things. Loving Jesus is enough. Following God is not about following rules and you don't need to add regulations to your faith. We are to allow our faith to dictate to our life, not the rules.

READ SCRIPTURE

I think I've mentioned before the pastor friend of mine who went to visit some new members and the wife began speaking to him about how frustrated she was because there were

so many people in the church who were not really Christian. She began by saying, there are so many who drink alcohol, who smoke, who dance, who go to movies that they really shouldn't be going to. They let their children dress in the most inappropriate manner. They surely can't be Christian. My friend looked at her and said very simply. When did loving Jesus stop being enough? When did we add on this list of rules and regulations to decide who is in and who is out, who is the good Christian and who is the bad Christian. Has loving Jesus ever not been enough to be considered as part of that number. I think a number of people, and maybe even some of us, have come to that conclusion.

I hope you have continued to pray faithfully for a miracle this week. The name of the person that I am praying for is Oliver. He is a 20 month old boy that they have just discovered has a critical genetic disease where his body is not able to digest. We are praying for a miracle, I will keep you updated. Just so you know, the doctors have told his family that he is not expected to survive.

Peter has had a busy and eventful week in Scripture as well. First healing the paralytic Aeneas and then the deceased Dorcas who rises up and today we find him kicking back at the seaside town of Joppa trying to get some well deserved R and R. He's up on the flat roof of his friend Simon the tanner, and he is praying and fasting and after all that he's been through he realizes that he is absolutely famished. He asks someone to go and make him a sandwich. I love the details that the Scripture provides in this account. As they are preparing it God comes to Peter and gives him a vision, and as you would expect it is a vision about food.

Let's talk for a moment about visions. Like healings we find them all through Scripture. And like healings, I believe that God gives people and potentially all of us visions and it is a matter, like healings, for us to follow them and to be open to see them and understand them which will happen only if we are in God's presence. In our first reading this morning we see a vision that God gives Abraham. Do you remember what that vision was? It was a wonderful, awe inspiring vision. A vision of children as numerous as the dust of the earth. Impossible because both he and his wife were old, I mean really old. I'm telling you Abraham, it is going to happen. In Ephesians we have another vision. It is one of a day when there will be only one faith, one hope, one baptism, one church. Not likely, look how many denominations we have. I am telling you, believe it and it will happen.

What is our vision as a church? And do we believe it to the point that we are ready to take whatever steps we need to ensure that the vision is carried out in confidence. Have you ever caught the vision of this church being the heart of the city where families and all people alike

stream to it, are equipped, and then leave for service in the world? Have you ever caught a vision of this church as a Matthew 25 church where anyone and everyone in need come streaming here and have their needs met?

Peter's vision was a little different in these verses. Since he was famished it centers, ostensibly at least, on food. I call it the pigs in a blanket dream. He sees a sheet fall from heaven and all sorts of various kinds of animals are in it. Any kind of animal that you can imagine is in it. God calls out to Peter in this vision and states to him: "Get up Peter, kill and eat." Eat a snake, a lizard, a pig?

The laws state in Leviticus, and Peter knew them very well, that he could not eat any of these animals. They were unclean, forbidden and there was no way he was going against that law. Some years back a finger was found in someone's chili. It was proved later that it was a sham because it was placed there. But what was your reaction to it when you learned about it? Almost like eating a banana, right? Didn't it make you gag just thinking of getting that thing between your teeth and biting down? Yuk!

That was Peter's reaction to God's command for him to get up and eat. Gag me, no way. No way, I've never done it and I never will. In order to be a good Jew and now a good Christian I have to follow the laws.

3 times Peter says no. You know, as much progress as Peter has made since Pentecost, he still has a long way to go. Do you remember when Jesus said he was going to be arrested and killed Peter yells at him and says never, that will never happen to you. Remember when Jesus tried to wash Peter's feet and Peter rebukes him again and says you will never wash my feet. Those were not Peter's finest moments. Peter had an understanding for the way things were supposed to be and the way things were supposed to go and when events, or people, or even God gets in the way, well, they just were supposed to not change and things have to go the way that they are written and planned. Does that sound familiar to any of us out there.

Stacy always laughs at me because whenever we have plans for the family and they change, I get so out of sorts. I'm not usually a letter of the law type person but when I have a plan, oh, don't try to change it on me. And when it does with the family, she just has to take over because I am so stuck on what could have and in my eyes should have been. Can I get a witness?

Peter, thank goodness for my sake but not for his sake, is the same way. He rebukes God, again. Surely not Lord, I have never eaten anything impure or unclean, was his response. 3 times God tells him to get up and eat and three times Peter says, that's not very wise. God I'm

not going to do it because, well, it is against my religion. I don't want to displease God, God, I guess I don't want to displease you, I mean, uh, what did you want me to do again? The sheet is taken away and vs. 17 states that Peter is left confused. No kidding. His whole understanding of his faith has been turned upside down because his faith was based upon the rules and not upon God's living Spirit that speaks to us and surprises us.

Peter's debate with God brings us to our current context as we find Peter telling God that loving Jesus is just not enough. You have to have strict dietary laws, you have to be circumcised, you have to share your faith twice a week, you have to go to church twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday. You have to be in favor of creationism, oppose abortion and homosexuality. You have to at least in the presence of other people live a good moral life, not smoke drink, see R rated films, but having cable TV is fine and if you do any of these things in private without other people seeing you then it really doesn't count.

At the end of the day a tally is made and those who follow all of these rules win and are given the Good Christian badge. God says, that which I have blessed, do not call profane. Do you know what God has blessed? God has blessed all things, even pleasure, and has allowed the rules to be translated through the eyes of Jesus Christ.

Do you know why Peter was given that vision? Because Cornelius, a gentile, was on his way to see him in order to be converted as a Christian. But Cornelius, like those animals, was unclean. He was a Roman, the enemy of Israel, he was a gentile, profane and impure, and God was saying to Peter: if he loves me, I have made him pure through the blood of Jesus Christ. Don't try to discourage him from following me stacking rule upon rule that he has to follow.

I have a vision, a vision where one day this church will be the heart of the borough and people from every economic class, people with every sort of background that you can imagine, people of every race, gender, nationality, and even sexual orientation, will flock here to find refuge and seek the face of God because they are loved for who they are, children of God, not because they have passed society's litmus test of being super Christians.

Loving Jesus is enough to be a member of the family of God. In order to convert people, at times the church itself has to be converted, that's what Peter faced. He had to be converted in order to see that Cornelius had a chance to convert to Jesus Christ, and he was and he did. In order for this vision to be realized we must strip away any and all preconceived notions of what it means to be a good Christian and accept people just as they are, because they simply love Jesus.

You know, I am actually really encouraged by the steps that we have already taken lately

to pursue this vision and to create this environment. Let us do it knowing that what draws us together is the love of Jesus Christ. Amen.