

# “Understanding God”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 17, 2009*

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 10:1-15

Acts 10:34-48

There are many reasons that people choose to be Christians: they find guidance, comfort and support in the words of the scriptures, they find peace in the assurance of eternal salvation, they enjoy being around and among other Christians, and they sense that God has a purpose for their lives and the church helps them discern that purpose.

And yet, there are other, more altruistic reasons, for participating in the Christian life as well: treating others with integrity and respect, honoring creation and all that is in it, and seeking to share the good news of Jesus Christ in deed and in action.

In the book of Acts, we witness this decision to become a Christian taking place over and over again. The apostles – those who have been miraculously converted to the task by the power of the Holy Spirit, like Paul, as well as those who were called by Jesus during his ministry, like Peter – they spread the good news of Jesus Christ to an ever-widening circle of people: to Greeks and Romans, to people of Samaria and Corinth and Asia, to men and women and children, to tanners and tent-makers, to fishermen and soldiers. As this new movement surges through the ancient world, its followers come to know God in powerful ways – transforming their lives – and their understanding of God grows through the witness of these new believers: confirming the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament that their God is the God of all people or, as Peter proclaims in this morning’s text: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” (Acts 10:34)

Luke writes that an angel appears to Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman soldier, and a “devout man who feared God.” (Acts 10:2) God is at work in Cornelius long before Peter shows up at his house. Clearly, it is God who first takes the initiative to break down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. The angel says to Cornelius: “your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.” (Acts 10:4)

An important part of understanding God, and the way that God works in the lives of people who become Christians, is this idea that God hears the prayers – both the words that are spoken and the deeds that are done – of all people, even those who do not yet know that salvation comes through Christ. God is already at work in the life of this man Cornelius, as he interacts with his family and his fellow workers. His vocation and his ethnicity do not place him outside of the bounds of God’s concern. As he seeks to know and understand God, the Holy Spirit brings into his life someone who can complete in him that which he has been seeking.

In this story, that someone is Peter who – of course – had been selected by Jesus and had undergone his own transformation earlier in the gospel story. Peter, who was a fisherman, had been taught to become a fisher of men. Peter, who had denied Jesus at the moment of the crucifixion, had been sought out by the resurrected Jesus and given a great responsibility to lead the movement of the early church. Peter, who preached boldly at Pentecost, had converted thousands of Jews to the Christian faith. And Peter, who had been jailed by the Jewish leaders, had been granted release from prison and a continued calling to share the good news to a wider audience.

But, Peter still did not – or could not yet – fully understand God. As an observant Jew, Peter continued to take pains to adhere to the customs of purity with regard to what he would eat and whose house he would visit. And so he is called again, in a vision, to a fuller understanding of how God is at work in the world through the good news of Jesus Christ; finally coming to comprehend how it is that God shows no partiality.

While praying and fasting, Peter has this vision about a blanket that descends to him from the sky. Upon it are all kinds of animals, including birds and reptiles, which he would have been prohibited to eat according to Jewish dietary laws. He is told to kill and eat whatever he wants from the assortment of animals and is told: “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:15)

Peter comes to understand that this vision concerns not only what he is to eat or not eat, but that it is also about what he is and is not to do. He realizes that Jesus also descended to earth not just for the salvation of some, but so that all might come to know and understand God through him. Just as the good news of Jesus was not limited by the boundaries of a particular time and location, neither should the ministry of the apostles be limited according to who has or has not previously known and understood the identity of God. What – or who – is so profane that God is not able to cleanse? Certainly, Peter himself had been chosen and redeemed; so why not anyone else?

When the messengers sent by Cornelius arrive at the home where Peter had been staying, they are invited in and shown hospitality before making the trip back. Already, Peter shows that he has a better understanding of God. Allowing Gentiles to stay in a Jewish home does nothing to make it unclean. This is God – God who has shown Peter that even a snake can be made clean – this is the God of limitless transformation.

And so, they travel to the home of Cornelius: Peter and some of the other Jewish Christians and the messengers who had come to get him. Along the way, Peter must have realized that this would be the first time he had ever set foot in the home of Gentile; the first time that he would have eaten food prepared by Gentiles. Besides that, he was going to the home of high-ranking Roman soldier: a representative of the same group of men who had brutally beaten and tortured Jesus before his death.

But, Peter's understanding of God was growing. Before receiving this vision and being visited by the messengers from Cornelius, the Peter's religious training had taught him to divide people into two categories: clean (the observant Jews) and unclean (the uncircumcised Gentiles).<sup>1</sup> No matter how pious a Gentile person was – and Cornelius is described as being a very pious Gentile – he remained uncircumcised. In Peter's mind, Jews and Gentiles had always been like apples and oranges: no matter how ripe and juicy the orange, it was still not an apple. Nothing could make it an apple because it had been created by God to be an orange. But, Peter's vision showed him that in the eyes of God, apples and oranges are both fruit: they look different, they taste different, they come from different trees, maybe even grow in different climates; but who is to say that an apple is better than an orange?

Peter had begun to understand God. And because he understood God, he was willing to travel with these messengers to the home of a Roman soldier and tell them the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Cornelius was a good person – as shown through his words and deeds – but Peter knew that he lacked something. He had not been given the opportunity to join the Christian church: to understand that God considered him to be just as precious and beloved as anyone else – Jew or Gentile, man or woman, fisherman or soldier. The point of this story is not that God saves Gentiles like Cornelius because he is a pious person; rather, it is his pious acts that give proof to his spiritual competence to repent.<sup>2</sup>

Peter said to Cornelius, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." The issue today for us is not Jew or Gentile, male or female, clean or unclean, even apples or oranges. It is more complicated than that. We tend to think of the church not so much as an ever-widening circle – breaking down the walls of separation between who is and who is not included in God's plan and purpose – but as an ebb and flow of influence and participation. The church in China and Africa is booming, but in the Western world it seems to be shrinking. The worldwide Pentecostal movement is growing, but many of our local Catholic and mainline churches are shutting their doors.

Church historian Rosemary Radford Reuther reminds us that the church has been organized to do two things: first, to pass along the tradition of the good news from one generation to the next; and second, to be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive to each generation.<sup>3</sup> Like Peter, we must remain open to the voice of the God who reveals to us the great power and possibility of transformation. Even if we do not view the world in terms of Jew or Gentile, apple or orange, we still have been commissioned to share the good news – in word and deed – throughout the world. There are many among us – in our families, in our communities, sometimes even

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<sup>1</sup> *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. 10

<sup>2</sup> *Texts for Preaching*, Year B.

<sup>3</sup> As retold by Barbara Lundblad in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

within our churches – who feel they live beyond the barrier of separation from God. It may be because they do not feel they are part of a community; it may be because they have not been shown the redemptive purpose of God which is in the scriptures, it may be because they do not sense God has a plan for their lives; it may be because of a previous experience in church which left them bruised or disinterested; it may be because they have not been offered the assurance of salvation based on something they have done or have not done. To them – and for our sakes as well – we must proclaim that God shows no partiality, that we understand God as a loving God, a forgiving God, a transforming God; who is already at work preparing them for salvation.

In Peter's day, God's redemptive purpose for Gentiles could not be realized unless and until the apostle changed his mind. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit has a hard time breaking through our stubborn desire to stay the way that we are. Sometimes, our traditions become so rock solid that we underestimate God's impartiality. Let us open the doors so that the wind of the Spirit might blow through this place and go with us into the world as we proclaim the good news, in word and deed, so that the barriers of separation from God might fall away, for this and every generation. AMEN.