

**Sermon**  
**19 May 2019**  
**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

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Reading: Acts 11:1-18

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If God speaks to you, you need to listen. Even when it makes you feel uncomfortable!

This is something the Apostle Peter had to learn the hard way.

Peter was part of a culture with very clear boundaries. He was part of the “people of God”. The Jews had very strict rules to follow to distinguish them from the people around them.

But then Jesus came along and turned their whole world upside down. Because he taught them to not build walls around themselves, but to rather build bridges to other people.

I think all of *us* know that we should build bridges rather than walls today (although everything that is going on with Brexit makes me doubt that a little), but in Peter’s time things were very different.

It was imbedded in Peter from the day he was born that he had to be different from the people who didn’t believe in God. The Jews were very serious about their religion and how they lived it out.

They believed that they had to be ritually clean before they could come into the presence of God. This meant that they had to follow certain rules.

Circumcision distinguished Jews from non-Jews. And if a Jew went into the house of an uncircumcised person, he would become ritually unclean. If a Jew ate unclean food, he would become ritually unclean.

If someone became unclean, there were lots of different rituals they had to follow before they could become clean again. But this was a big deal, because, remember, you were not allowed in the presence of God if you were unclean – and nobody wanted to be excluded from the presence of God.

So it's not as if the Jews who didn't want to mix with others thought they were better than them, or something like that, it was just an integral part of their relationship with God. It defined who they were.

But when God sent Jesus, he broke down all those barriers. Jesus explained to the people that he came to save the Jews, but everybody else too.

And the big discussion at the "General Assembly" in Jerusalem was about how to do this practically. A large group of people wanted new believers to convert to Judaism first, so that they could also follow all the rules and regulations, and become members of the family of God in this way; but that's not the way God saw it.

So He spoke to Peter. In a vision.

Peter saw a large sheet being let down from heaven by its 4 corners, and in it he saw lots of different animals, reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him to kill and eat.

Peter's immediate response was: "No!" Because he has never in his life eaten anything unclean.

But then the voice said: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened 3 times.

There's even more to this vision than meets the eye. See how I always tell you that symbols and numbers were very important in those days?

Well, the fact that the sheet had 4 corners, indicated that this vision applied to the whole world: North, East, South, West; and also that it applied at all times: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter.

The fact that Peter saw it 3 times, indicated that it was true. If you said or did anything 3 times in those days, it meant that you really meant it – it was like putting your signature at the bottom of a contract today.

In Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 we find the lists of clean and unclean food. Animals with split hooves that chew the cud could be eaten, freshwater fish with fins and scales could be eaten, and certain non-meat-eating birds could be eaten. And that was it. All animals that didn't meet these requirements, were unclean. Most insects were unclean too.

But the sheet was filled with both clean and unclean animals.

While God was speaking to Peter in this vision, he also spoke to Cornelius (who was not a Jew) through an angel, telling him to send for Peter.

So right after God showed Peter that NOTHING he has made is unclean, 3 men chapped his door and invited him to Cornelius' house, where God's Spirit moved right through all their cultural and religious boundaries, and settled on these ritually unclean men in the exact same way the Spirit came to Peter and the other Jews.

At this Peter's eyes opened and he understood what God expected of him.

Absolutely everybody is welcome in the kingdom of God. And when Peter explained to the Assembly how he came to learn this, they had no further objections and they praised God.

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This was a BIG thing. It couldn't have been easy for everybody to accept a change like that, and it must have taken quite some time before it was applied everywhere, but it was fundamental to the establishment of the Christian Church.

That's how all of us came to be part of the family of God!

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So you would think that after all these years we would understand that God loves all people equally and we should treat everybody the same... But we don't, do we?

I would like to read you a blog that a minister in America wrote a wee while ago. His name is Timothy, and he said:

“I never dreamed that taking a child to Disney World could be so difficult — or that such a trip could teach me so much about God’s outrageous grace.

Our middle daughter had been previously adopted by another family. I am sure this couple had the best of intentions, but they never quite integrated the adopted child into their family of biological children. After a couple of rough years, they dissolved the adoption, and we ended up welcoming an eight-year-old girl into our home.

For one reason or another, whenever our daughter’s previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left their adopted daughter with a family friend. Usually — at least in the child’s mind — this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

And so, by the time we adopted our daughter, she had seen many pictures of Disney World and she had heard about the rides and the characters and the parades. But when it came to passing through the gates of the Magic Kingdom, she had always been the one left on the outside.

Once I found out about this history, I made plans to take her to Disney World...

I thought I had mastered the Disney World drill. I knew from previous experiences that the prospect of seeing cast members in freakishly oversized mouse and duck costumes somehow turns children into squirming bundles of emotional instability.

What I *didn't* expect was that the prospect of visiting this dreamworld would produce a stream of downright devilish behaviour in our newest daughter.

In the month leading up to our trip to the Magic Kingdom, she stole food when a simple request would have gained her a snack. She lied when it would have been easier to tell the truth. She whispered insults that were carefully crafted to hurt her older sister as deeply as possible — and, as the days on the calendar moved closer to the trip, her mutinies multiplied.

A couple of days before our family headed to Florida, I pulled our daughter into my lap to talk through her latest escapade. “I know what you’re going to do,” she stated flatly. “You’re not going to take me to Disney World, are you?”

The thought hadn’t actually crossed my mind, but her downward spiral suddenly started to make some sense. She knew she couldn’t earn her way into the Magic Kingdom — she had tried and failed that test several times before — so she was living in a way that placed her as far as possible from the most magical place on earth.

In retrospect, I'm embarrassed to admit that, in that moment, I was tempted to turn her fear to my own advantage. The easiest response would have been, 'If you don't start behaving better, you're right, we won't take you' — but, by God's grace, I didn't. Instead, I asked her, 'Is this trip something we're doing as a family?'

She nodded, brown eyes wide and tear-rimmed.

'Are you part of this family?'

She nodded again.

'Then you're going with us. Sure, there may be some consequences to help you remember what's right and what's wrong — but you're part of our family, and we're not leaving you behind.'

I'd like to say that her behaviour grew better after that moment. It didn't. Her choices pretty much spiralled out of control at every hotel and rest stop all the way there.

Still, we headed to Disney World on the day we had promised, and it was a typical Disney day. Overpriced tickets, overpriced meals, and lots of lines, mingled with just enough manufactured magic to consider maybe going again someday.

In our hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded.

When bedtime rolled around, I prayed with her, held her, and asked, 'So how was your first day at Disney World?'

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. ‘Daddy’” she said, ‘I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.’

*It wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”*

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Just like that girl was adopted into that family, we’ve all been adopted into the family of God. Even the people around us we don’t really like!

It’s hard to be the one who’s left out. For whatever reason.

And the sad thing is – I think we sometimes feel so complacent when we are part of a group, that we don’t even realise that there are others outside our group, all alone, longing to belong.

Just like God spoke to Peter in our reading, God is speaking to us all this morning too!

And He is telling us that we should never exclude people. We shouldn’t exclude them from our church, we shouldn’t exclude them from our lives, we shouldn’t exclude them from things we are doing.

Not because they are so special that they deserve to be a part of our group, not because they are following all the right rules and are saying and doing all the right things; but because, just like us, they belong to God.

The Holy Spirit doesn't only move through boundaries, He gives us the power shift boundary lines.

I'm not pretending that this is easy. Because it might even lead to us questioning our own identity. We define who we are by the people we surround ourselves with. And it's sometimes very hard to change.

What God's Spirit wants us to do is to *connect* with people, not to *correct* them.

The same things might not be important to everybody in the world, but you know what? That's okay.

But just because we are not exactly the same as others, it doesn't mean that we should ignore their existence. Or try to change them.

We shouldn't correct, we should connect. And we should praise God, like Peter and his peers, for the opportunity to do that. Because different to Disney's Magical Kingdom, the Kingdom of God is open to EVERYONE who believes.

May God's Spirit grant us all the grace and the power to build bridges, and not walls.

Amen