

July 14, 2019  
Acts 10:9-16  
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### **“Table Grace”**

**Good morning! I am glad to be back in the pulpit at Creekside, and want to assure you that if there are any difficulties with the sermon this morning, they are entirely my fault. Thanks to our media team and worship team for facilitating things last week: we’ll have a chance to hear more about Annual Conference and a report from Jan Nicodemus in September.**

**I had an interesting conversation about prayer with the Onward and Overcomer’s classes a couple weeks ago; the conversation turned toward times that we pray and then to praying before meals. Many of us have, or had in the homes where we grew up, a practice of praying a blessing before each meal. In my home, that prayer was always called “grace”; as in, Who’s going to say grace tonight? Except in my family, the question was What are we going to sing for grace? We had a repertoire of 5-6 sung table graces: my favorite was “For Health and Strength” because it was the shortest, but it could also be sung as a round, so if somebody started in a couple bars late, we might have to sing it two or three times. None of our graces were as lively as the Superman grace from Camp Mack (do they still sing that at Youth Camp?) or even Johnny Appleseed with all the Amens at the end, but we sang before every meal -- even when we ate out in restaurants, which was mortifying when I was an adolescent. But for all that repetition, it took me years -- I mean until I was in high school - - to figure out that a blessing for food and the theological concept of unmerited favor through Jesus Christ were the same word.**

**We have been dipping into the book of Acts and studying the book “Draw the Circle” since mid-June; I knew there would be some meaningful overlap, and that overlap was especially apparent in preparing for today’s service. I’d like to invite us to consider the grace of God’s table. And more than just consider it -- you will be**

invited after the sermon to participate in the grace of God's table as we share bread and cup communion. But first, our text from Acts chapter 10. This is not the first biblical story we have of table fellowship -- not by a long shot -- but it is certainly one of the most dramatic. Jewish law, based on the earliest books of the Old Testament, had a lot to say about dietary practice. Not only *what* you could and could not eat, *how* it had to be prepared, *whom* you could eat with (men and women did not generally eat together, Jews never ate with non-Jews), and *how* you had to wash beforehand in order to be considered ritually clean. In other words, in the Jewish world, eating was a big deal. Time and time again in the gospels, Jesus and his disciples are criticized for eating with sinners, picking grain on the Sabbath, or letting a woman crash a respectable dinner gathering to anoint Jesus' feet. No, no, and oh no.

Acts 10 is the account of Peter, one of the Jewish leaders of the apostles after the coming of the Holy Spirit, and Cornelius, a Roman centurion -- or military commander. Cornelius is not a Jew, but the author of Acts gives him this glowing description: "He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God." (10:2) Here's a spoiler alert: these characteristics (God-fearing, generous, in constant prayer) are what the author of Acts thinks are the most important things about being a Christian. Cornelius is praying one afternoon, and hears an angel from God tell him to send a couple Roman soldiers to Joppa -- a thirty mile journey -- to go get Simon Peter. The next day at noon, Peter is in Joppa praying and has a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven filled with all kinds of food that Jews are not allowed to eat. And God's voice says, "Get up, kill and eat" and Peter says, "No way -- I have always followed the law." This repeats twice more, the sheet is drawn up to heaven, and Peter is left wondering: what did that mean? And there's a knock on the door, and Cornelius' soldiers say Our boss had a angel tell him that we're supposed to take you back to Caesarea with us. This story is the one that Mark Batterson uses on Day 1 of "Draw the Circle," so I'm going to quote him:

Now let me state the obvious: Cornelius and Peter should have never met each other. Never. Ever. They were separated by geography. The thirty-two mile distance between towns may not

seem like much to us, but the average person in the first century didn't travel outside a thirty-mile radius of their birthplace. And more significantly, they were separated by ethnicity. Roman soldiers and Jewish disciples didn't hang out. In fact, Peter broke every law in the Jewish books when he entered the home of Cornelius.

Every Christian who is not a convert from Judaism is part of the church because of the prayers of these two men, and their willingness to extend God's grace to one another. Cornelius had manpower and military backing on his side, but he was a devout believer in Christ who was never going to be included by Jesus' disciples. Peter was an apostle and a God-fearing, law-abiding Jew, but Jews were arresting Christians, and the Romans were arresting anyone who caused trouble. The good news of Christ would never take hold if it were constantly being stamped out. God understood, even though Peter and Cornelius did not, that those two needed each other -- that the church of Jesus Christ needed to widen its welcome to include non-Jews, and that although observing the law was important, and would continue to be important for Jewish believers, the heirs to the kingdom of God are the believers who are devout, generous and seeking God's will through prayer. The prayer of two faithful and God-fearing men from totally different cultures and backgrounds--two men who should never ever have met -- prayer is how God brought Cornelius and Peter together and opened Christianity to no-Jews. It happened around a vision of a table of food. It was an act of grace.

As we will hear in the next week or two, this act of grace was met with quite a bit of resistance. If someone tells you it is a simple thing to cross cultural, religious and class boundaries to listen and share a meal with someone you have never met and aren't sure whether you can trust -- they are lying. This act of grace to bring these different people together also meant a huge step of faith, trust, and humility on the part of Cornelius and Peter.

In a moment, you will be invited to the Lord's table to share the bread and cup of communion: what we in the Church of the Brethren see as a representation of Christ's body and blood, and a sign of his ongoing presence with us. We should not take this invitation lightly. Jesus gave his life to offer us the grace of this invitation; some Christians

**risk their lives when they accept it. Anyone who has claimed the grace of Jesus Christ and has faith in him is welcome to this table. I will give you a few minutes of silence before you are served for you to reflect whether you are right with God and your neighbor. Children are welcome to come forward with an adult for a blessing: we have crackers and grapes for you. Our song of invitation is handout which Diane will play once all the way through before we sing. Let us come to the table of grace.**