

God Has a Vision For Us
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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LARRY THE LOBSTER

Philip Yancey tells about a children's sermon he did a while back. He brought what he called a "suspiciously smelly and squirming shopping bag" that was to be the focal point for the lesson that day. In the bag, among other things, he had barbecued pork rinds (which he ate with the kids), a rubber snake (which made the girls scream) and a live Maine lobster that he nicknamed "Larry." Larry the lobster put on a good show for the kids, waving his claw in a most menacing fashion.

The point of this most unusual children's sermon was to tell the kids that all these things were forbidden by God in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. We could understand why God might forbid us to eat or touch a snake. But, some of the things declared off limits didn't seem to be all that bad. The title of his sermon that day was: "What did God have against lobster?"

CLEAN AND UNCLEAN

Most of us simply don't pay much attention to Leviticus with its strange dietary laws and archaic regulations. If you've ever tried to read the Bible straight through, I bet you slowed down or gave up when you came to the book of Leviticus for this very reason. And yet, in order to understand many of the key concepts in the New Testament, we have to understand this most puzzling book from the Old Testament. In fact, reference was made to the dietary laws from Leviticus in our lesson for today from the book of Acts.

It seems that the apostle Peter had a dream. Actually, for a Jew it was more of a nightmare. Something that looked like a sheet descended from heaven, and when the four corners of the sheet were dropped, Peter could see what was in the sheet. It was not a pretty sight. Creep crawly snakes, smelly pigs and lizards and other assorted animals that were forbidden by Jewish law.

In order for you to get the emotional impact this may have had for Peter, and since this is Mother's Day, let me use a "motherly" example. When a child is small, he or she has no idea about what is good or bad. But, they soon learn. When mom sees her child about to pick up a dead fly in the corner of the room and see if it tastes good, she yells, "Put that down this instant. That's nasty. Now, go wash your hands."

We might not read Leviticus, but we had mom to tell us that the palmetto bug does not make a good snack! Indeed, some of the dietary laws of Leviticus seem to make sense from a medical standpoint. If you eat too much pork, the arteries will clog.

But, there were some taboos that didn't seem to make much sense. Take lobster for instance. Why did God (or to be more precise, God's people) have a problem with lobster? It had to do with looks. The lobster looks odd so therefore it must be something that is "unclean," not fit for human consumption. Rabbi Jacob Neuser wrote, "If I had to say in a few words what makes something unclean, it is something that, for one reason or another is abnormal."

NO ODDBALLS ALLOWED

You have to admit that they have a point on this one. Lobster is delicious to eat, but it is one strange looking creature. Snakes may look beautiful to a naturalist, but I still steer clear when

one comes slithering my way. Rattlesnake my indeed taste like chicken, but I will never know. According to Yancey the essence of the Old Testament laws on uncleanness could be expressed in this way: "No oddballs allowed."

Now I guess if the regulations had applied only to food, I would say that this was a quirky but harmless religious belief. After all, most of us are quirky in our own way about what we eat and how we act.

But, the taboos went beyond just diet. The taboos about what was clean and unclean applied to people as well. Again, the criterion for determining who was clean and unclean was simple. If you are different, you are unclean. If you are like us, that is, if you are male, Jewish and without any physical deformities, then you are clean. The blind, the lame, and the disfigured were all considered unclean. Go to a Gentile's home and eat, and you are unclean. Bring a Gentile too far into the temple, and you could be executed.

William Barclay wrote that at one time Jewish men began their daily prayers by giving thanks to God "who has not made me a Gentile.... who has not made me a slave.... who has not made me a woman." This is the issue being dealt with by our lesson for today. It's not just about a disgusting meal from heaven. It's about people. Whom can we accept and whom should we reject?

The early believers in Christ were also devout Jews. They considered Jesus to be "their" Messiah. It never occurred to them that following Jesus would make it necessary for them to change some of their Jewish practices. Indeed, they went right on following the rules and regulations that they followed before Jesus came.

It took several visions from God before they began to change their way of thinking and living. And it took even longer before they could quit practicing what one theologian has called the "the politics of purity."

Thank God we're not like that. Right? We are like that. All of us are like that.

Just as we may have different lists when it comes to eating taboos, we probably have different lists when it comes to people taboos. But, mark this well. We still have our lists. There are still those that we consider to be "oddballs", those who are, for whatever reason, beyond the reach of God's love.

DEMONIC DIVISION

I've been thinking about those American soldiers who abused Iraqi prisoners and have caused such a stir all over the world. Their actions have been condemned and rightly so.

The President and the Secretary of Defense have repeatedly said that these were just a "few bad apples", and that this is not who we are as a people. We're going to make an example of these people for behaving so badly.

At the same time I thought about the anguished faces of family members of the accused. They too have been interviewed and have said in effect, "She was just fine when she left. He was an upstanding person in our community. I can't imagine what happened." But, now these un-American oddballs, along with their families are disgraced.

And yet, labeling these people as oddballs does not give us any satisfaction. The journalists have tried to find some history of abuse or abnormal behavior that would have predicted these

actions but without much success. It seems that perfectly normal people acted in some perfectly abnormal ways. Some used a line that sounds chillingly familiar, "I was just following orders."

If these perfectly normal people can act in this way, might it be possible, given the right circumstances, for us to act in that way too?

Before you answer let me tell you about a psychological experiment done, I think, at UCLA quite a few years ago. The purpose of the experiment was to study the psychological dynamics at work when people have control over other people.

Top students at the college volunteered for the experiment and were randomly divided into two groups, guards and prisoners. They set up a mock prison in the basement of the psychology building. (By the way, as one who spent many years in the basement of a psychology building, I find this particular detail quite appropriate.) Anyway, they recorded what happened, and they were shocked at the results.

The experiment was supposed to last several weeks, but they had to cancel it early. The "guards" began abusing the "prisoners" in ways that were at the very end similar to the abuse that is now coming to light in Iraq. Now, mind you, these weren't oddballs. They were successful, intelligent college students. Nobody else gets into the UCLA graduate program in psychology. But, these bright, motivated students did things that were abhorrent.

I saw one of the professors who conducted that experiment on TV recently, and you could still see the pain in his face when he talked about what happened. I think that he felt guilty about it all. Before this experiment, he didn't realize the terrible consequences of dividing people into clean and unclean groups. After the experiment, he knew that power all too well. And I think that it was this demonic power, the demonic power of division that Jesus came to defeat with the gospel.

JESUS VERSUS THE EARLY DISCIPLES

When you look at the life of Jesus and compare it with the practice of the early church, you see a big discrepancy. The early church maintained strict rules about what was clean and what was unclean, but they did it to the exclusion of the heart of the gospel, namely grace.

In some cases, the early church didn't seem all that concerned about the welfare of the world. They were not focused on evangelism. Instead the leaders of the early church seemed to be worried about religious and moral purity.

And that's why they had such a problem with Peter. They asked, "Why was Peter eating with Gentiles? Was he out of his mind?" The Scripture says that they had heard about how the Gentiles had been converted to the cause of Christ in large numbers, but this was not what interested them.

No, they didn't seem to care that many Gentiles had accepted the good news about Jesus. They had already forgotten all that Great Commission stuff. Instead, they were worried about holiness, and Peter's willingness to fraternize with Gentiles seriously jeopardized their sacred division between clean and unclean.

After all, as the old saying goes, "You are known by the company you keep." For the Jewish Christians of that time, that was not just an old saying. It was an article of faith.

They couldn't seem to remember that the whole ministry of Jesus was absolutely the antithesis of this way of thinking.

Jesus didn't court the rich and powerful. Jesus infuriated the rich and powerful. Jesus was infamous on account of the company he kept. Jesus was known for eating with "sinners" like tax collectors who cheating the people with their crafty and sometimes dishonest ways. Jesus was known for offering healing and a word of hope to people who were rejected by society.

At times it looked like Jesus was even giving aid and comfort to the enemy. For example, when a Roman soldier came asking for Jesus' help, Jesus said that this soldier had more faith than the whole Jewish nation. Jesus even volunteered to enter the soldier's house in order to heal his servant! I'm sure that won a lot of hearts and minds to the cause of Christ.

It's no wonder to me that the Jewish leaders were, from the very beginning, looking for a way to kill Jesus. He was a man who broke all the rules. He touched lepers, ignored many of the Sabbath laws, and paid attention to women and children. Jesus made it his business to roast all the sacred cows of his era, and some of the ranchers were getting quite restless.

You would think that by now the disciples would have understood the difference between the message of Jesus and the message of division preached by the religious establishment. They had witnessed Jesus touching the untouchables. Jesus had given them the Great Commission which told basically told them that their job was to take the gospel into the whole world.

But, the disciples still don't "get it."

What are the leaders of the early church worried about? They are worried about Peter going to dinner with the wrong people. Surely they had more important issues. But, such is our convoluted logic when we become obsessed with deciding who is clean and who is unclean, who is with us and who is against us.

Note this, Peter understood their misgivings. Peter would have gladly gone along with their rules and regulations. If God hadn't beaten the thick headed "Rock" over the head three times with an overwhelming vision, Peter would have never have preached the gospel to the Gentiles or have gone to one of their homes to eat. When he was a little child, Peter had the rules pounded into his mind. Some things are right and some things are wrong. Don't do the wrong things. But, God would not relent. He told Peter, "What I've said is clean is clean. Go preach to the Gentiles. And so Peter preached.

We shouldn't be too hard on the leaders of the early church. In our own way, we know that we do the same thing. We categorize people into clean and unclean, good and bad. If we are to display the grace of the gospel in our lives, we will need a vision as well. We will need to be empowered by the Spirit to change those attitudes and sacred beliefs which in fact keep us from God and God's people.

NOT SUPPOSITION

In my family, we used to play a game called "let' suppose." It was a way of looking at things in a different way even though we were not fully convinced that our "supposing" was true. So, let's suppose.

Suppose we shouldn't divide the world up into clean and unclean, people like us and people who are not like us. Suppose there's just one kind of person in the world.

Suppose we're all unclean. Suppose we're all sinners, oddballs who are not worthy of God's love and care.

And yet, God decides to love us anyway.

Well, according to the Bible, that's not really supposition. That's the gospel. That's the message of God as revealed by Jesus.

God has declared the unclean clean.
God in Christ has sanctified the whole world.

MOVING THE FENCE

William Barclay told a story from World War II. It seems that in France some soldiers brought the body of a dead comrade to cemetery to have him buried.

The priest gently asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic. The soldiers didn't know. The priest sadly informed them that in that case, he could not permit burial in the church yard.

So the soldiers dug a grave just outside the cemetery fence. And they laid their comrade to rest. The next day the soldiers came back to add some flowers, only to discover that the grave was nowhere to be found.

Bewildered, they were about to leave when the priest came up to speak to them. It seems that he could not sleep the night before. He was deeply troubled about his refusal to let them bury their fallen comrade in the parish cemetery.

So, early in the morning, he moved the fence, in order to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

Often we in the church are in the fence building business, always talking about what we believe and what we don't believe. That's an important and necessary activity. Truth demands that we establish some boundaries.

But, I would submit to you that in light of the ministry of Jesus and the message of today's lesson, it is equally important that we learn how to be fence movers as well. Truth does indeed demand that we establish some boundaries, but grace demands that we keep those boundaries flexible.

Just as God had a dream for Peter, I believe that God has a dream for us as well. It is a dream of reaching the world for Christ. In that dream we see that even that which disgusts us can be used for the glory of God. God can make clean that which seemed hopelessly soiled.

The gospel is always expansive, reaching out in ever expanding circles. Unfortunately, it is often our nature to be reclusive, hunkering down with those who live like us and think like us. But, God sends us visions and more importantly God sends us people who cause us to go places that we would have never gone and preach the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

The Scripture tells us that a Gentile man by the name of Cornelius was converted because of that vision which Peter received. But, I believe that Peter was converted as well, along with the rest of the church. Their vision of what it meant to be a disciple of Christ was renewed and expanded. And that vision continues to change what we think and believe.

So I ask you this morning, who do you think is unclean? Who do you avoid because you do not like what they believe or what they do?

Maybe that's the very person God wants you to visit with a word of hope and salvation. Don't try and resist. Take it from a hard headed guy by the name of Peter. God's vision can change everything.

May we be instruments of his glorious grace.

Amen.