

“God’s Feast for All”

My father was a United Methodist minister. I was the oldest of four boys. I learned how church members respected their pastors and enjoyed doing things for them. In 1972 my mother was pregnant with my youngest brother Stephen. We lived in Clover, S.C. at the time. Mama continued to use the same doctor she had used during her prior pregnancies in Greenwood, S.C. Because she was going to have the baby in Greenwood, she went to Greenwood for several weeks to stay with friends while she waited for Stephen to be born. Greenwood was a two hour trip from Clover.

While my mother was gone, several church members in Clover helped us out by keeping my brother David and me. My brother Tim was not yet in school and was sent to stay with my grandparents in Florence. One Saturday night my father, David, and me were invited over to eat dinner at the home of one the ladies in the church.

When we arrived at the home to eat, I could smell the fried chicken cooking. I could also smell fresh biscuits. I loved fried chicken but I knew there was a problem. For some reason, my father did not like chicken. When we were greeted at the door, the lady said she was so looking forward to feeding her pastor and she

had made fried chicken just for him. The assumption was that all ministers love fried chicken. I wondered what my father was going to do.

Before my father could say anything, my brother David blurted out, "My daddy hates chicken." My father quickly responded that he liked chicken. He ate chicken that night, even though I knew he didn't like it. Daddy realized that there are more important things than always insisting that you will not eat something. He also knew he had to be open to whatever came up.

We read today a story about Peter which illustrates the growing pains of the new Christian movement. In Acts 11:1-18, we are given a symbolic story about whether one objects to eating certain foods. The new Christian sect originally consisted of those of the Jewish faith. Jewish men were circumcised and one of the early beliefs of the church was that Christians also needed to be circumcised. Peter has been criticized for going to the home of uncircumcised men and eating among them. In reality, the new Christians did not want to extend the faith to anyone who was not circumcised.

God provides Peter with a vision to teach him and other Christians about who can enjoy the benefits of the new faith. Peter sees a large sheet coming down from heaven which contained representatives of all animals, beasts, birds, and

reptiles. We read in Genesis 1:30 that these animals were given to human beings as food. God tells Peter to get up, kill the animals and eat them as food.

Peter objects to God's command by saying "nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." Peter is a practicing Jew who follows the food laws. He is worried about ceremonial laws. He had to make sure what he ate was kosher. Leviticus and Deuteronomy had requirements that Jews could not eat ritually unclean animals.

This vision is symbolic of whether the Christian faith will be made available to those outside the Jewish faith. God has prepared Peter because Peter had received an invitation to the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Cornelius is a Gentile and is uncircumcised. He has received a message from an angel that Simon Peter will tell him how he and his household will be saved. Peter is invited to go to the home of Cornelius. This is a critical time in the spread of the Christian faith. Will Peter, one of the leaders of the new faith, be willing to go to Cornelius' home? Peter is worried about going into Cornelius' home because he is uncircumcised. A part of Peter did not want to associate with a Gentile.

You might think that it's odd that Peter and other Jews would not want to tell their faith to all people. However, even today we have tendencies to not associate with other people. I am old enough to remember segregated schools

during my first three years of school. I first went to school with Black children when I was in the fourth grade. By the time I was in the 5th grade my best friend in school was an African-American named Joe Adams. I invited Joe home with me one afternoon to play at the church parsonage. I never thought there was anything wrong with this. My mother came home while I was playing with Joe in the yard. She had been out with several women in the church. After Joe left, I was talking with my mother. She told me she was okay with my bringing Joe over to play but she was afraid that others might talk about my bringing a black person over to the parsonage. I learned then, in 1971, of the presence of prejudice in my culture, even among Christians.

We have come a long way since 1971 in race relations. We have seen the positive effects of integration. Anthropologists confirm that all people need each other. The Bible itself speaks to how all people are fulfilled in each other.

God responds to Peter's objection by telling him "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Because the disciples usually did not get it the first time, God has to tell this to Peter three times. God is making clear to Peter that all persons, including the Gentiles and the uncircumcised, have been made clean by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter is not to consider anyone profane just because they do not follow Jewish ceremonial laws.

Peter is also convicted by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit tells him not to make a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. He realizes he must go to the home of Cornelius. When he is in the home of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit comes down and blesses them just as the Holy Spirit had come on the day of Pentecost. Peter realized that God had given the same gift of salvation to uncircumcised Gentiles. The common gift of all was the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Cornelius thus became the first uncircumcised Gentile admitted into the Christian faith. This would be critical to the growth of the faith. Later in Acts 15, the Christians hold a council over whether Christians had to be circumcised to be brought into the Christian congregation. Peter was part of this council. Peter had learned from his experience with Cornelius. In the ultimate act of hospitality, Christian leaders decided that new believers, including Gentiles, did not have to be circumcised to become part of the Christian faith. The believers had followed Jesus' admonition in John 13 in which he said "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another."

What does this mean to you as Christians today? We have to be open and receptive to all being members of the Christian faith. We have made great strides in race relations and realize that we must associate with all people, regardless of racial or ethnic background. Unfortunately there are elements of racism which are

still present in our society. We must be witnesses in our faith that prejudice has no place in our society,

We must make sure that we do not distinguish ourselves in other ways. At times it appears that Christians divide themselves today between the rich and the poor. Sadly, some Christians today are dividing themselves based on political ideology. Some are shunned just because they are different. Is our congregation welcome to the poor? Do all persons feel comfortable coming into our church? Are we willing to sit in the pew next to someone whose political views are different from ours? Will we shake hands with the person we really don't like?

In our continuing education group this year, we have studied Rev. Tod Bolsinger's book, *Canoeing the Mountains*. We have looked at how the Christian church today faces the challenge of staying relevant and alive in a culture which no longer responds to how we have done church in the past. Rev. Bolsinger concludes we must accept multiculturalism if the church is going to survive. Multiculturalism is defined as "the presence of, or support for, the presence of several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society."

Rev. Bolsinger's advice is critical for our church. People in America, including many in the church, are fearful of the fact that the influence of white people of European descent in our country is decreasing. By 2040, European

whites will become a minority of the population in the United States. Instead of falling prey to this fear, Rev. Bolsinger points out the church needs to embrace the ideas and experiences of other groups such as Hispanics, African-Americans and refugees. This is in large part because these groups, unlike most white Americans, have had to face significant challenges over the years and have had to adjust to the situation in order to be relevant and to survive.

Rev. Bolsinger's advice really is not that radical. It's just a matter of learning, just as Peter had to learn some two thousand years ago that we cannot limit ourselves to our old way of thinking. We have to be willing to open up to new ideas and experiences to keep our church vibrant and relevant.

We come together today to celebrate as family. How open will our family be? We enjoy teaching our children and grandchildren in Bible school. We enjoy their music today. We have our traditions and our heritage. We must remember today to accept all into our Christian congregation. We must realize that this includes those who are not necessarily the same color we are or from the same cultural background. Jesus ate with the prostitutes, the poor and the tax collectors and accepted them into his kingdom. Are we willing to learn, as Peter did when he accepted Cornelius into the early church that God's feast is for all?