



Village Is a Place of Conversation

TEXT
Acts 10:9–33

November 1, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We are talking about Village Being Village. We are talking about why you would take money from your pocket and invest it in the ministry of this church, and the truth is, if we talk about the DNA of Village, of Village being Village, I think we need to talk about this story.

Some stories are just entertaining. But some stories shape us. Some stories inform how we see the world. Toward that end, this is an important story.

Peter was among the first disciples Jesus called. He dropped his nets and followed Jesus to find a more meaningful life. This curious fisherman became a leader of the church. And he has a vision. A sheet comes down from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals. You don't have to know much about Judaism to know that keeping kosher is important. Some things you just don't eat. Peter kept kosher his whole life — as did Jesus, we can assume. It was one of those spiritual practices that grounds faith into daily living. Every meal

is a reminder that everything we do is an expression of our faith. Everything we do matters to God. It's a beautiful practice.

Diet is one of the things that distinguished Jews from non-Jews or Gentiles. Jews were called to live a holy life. *Holy* literally translates: "set apart." To be holy is to be unlike others, to walk in a different way. Keeping kosher is just one visible expression of this larger calling to be holy, to be set apart.

But the vision that Peter receives turns all of that on its head. Clean and unclean are all included in the vision, and the voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." To be clear, it wasn't Peter who designated food kosher or not; it was God. Keeping kosher was not a hobby; it was the Torah. Peter says, "I follow Torah and I have never eaten anything unclean." That's the right answer. But now is God saying something different? Is being right no longer enough? It's confusing.

While this is happening with Peter, we meet Cornelius. Cornelius is a Gentile. Cornelius could eat anything,

I suppose, although some fruits and vegetables are always recommended. Cornelius, though not Jewish, he is religious. Cornelius is visited by an angel. The Greek word for *angel* is *Angelos*. It means "messenger." An angel is a messenger from God. An angel comes to Cornelius and instructs him to call Peter, the Jewish apostle, to come to his Gentile home.

And this is when the story becomes remarkable. Peter comes to Cornelius' house. Peter is a bit uncomfortable because he says it's not lawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile. "You aren't my people. Our whole deal is to socially distance, to be holy, to be set apart from you. You know this, Cornelius, so why did you send for me?"

Cornelius says, "I really don't know; it's just what the angel said to do."

What strikes me is that neither of these men knows what God is up to until they talk to one another. Peter had a vision. Cornelius is visited by an angel. As spiritual experiences go, visions and angels have to be upper tier experiences. But neither of them really understands what's happening here.

Peter says, God shows no partiality, but then he says it's not lawful to associate with you. Cornelius doesn't know what Peter is going to say; he just knows he should listen to him.

Neither of them knew what God was doing — that is until they talked to one another. But once they talk, the result is the greatest reformation in the history of the church. A completely new understanding of what it is to be holy emerges. They see that God is not asking them to be set apart from one another, but rather to be committed to one another. What sets them apart, what makes them holy, is their ability to not simply be separated from the others, but to be committed to those previously understood as the other.

This story is an important one in my own faith and ministry, because it demonstrates the power of conversation. At Village, we trust the power of conversation. That may sound kind of lame to you. You may prefer that Village be a place of action. Well, we are that too.

But don't rush by the importance of conversation. Our culture needs folks who are committed to conversation. We are going to vote this week — unless you have already checked that off of your to-do list. If not, I hope you vote. It is a faithful thing to do.

One thing that has not occurred during this political season is any real conversation. There has been division, of course. Politics has always been divisive. And yet at times,

politics has provided something of a national conversation; but not now. Now the divisions ignore commonalities that we share. We weaponize differences, and look over what is good on the other side, and magnify what's bad. That kind of cultural practice destroys. And it is much easier to destroy a nation than to build one.

In 1960, Stanford University asked whether folks would be pleased, concerned or unmoved if their child married someone from the other political party. Only five percent of Republicans and four percent of Democrats expressed any concern. But 50 years later, in 2010, a similar survey demonstrated that 49 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats expressed significant concern over interparty marriage.¹ I would be surprised if those numbers weren't higher in 2020.

We are going to vote this week. No matter which candidates are elected and which candidates are not, we are still going to be divided. As long as that is true, we will remain a fractured nation. Most troubling, there are reports of self-appointed militias — armed citizens who are threatening armed conflict, even civil war, if things don't go their way. Even an elected leader in Johnson County has posted similar warnings.

It may leave you feeling a bit helpless, but I would suggest that we are not powerless. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said, "The greatest single

antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope."²

Like Peter and Cornelius, we need to trust the power of conversation. It might be just the place where we see what God is really doing.

At Village, we have committed ourselves to talk about the things that matter in our world and in your lives. We called Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka to join us, because one of his greatest gifts is facilitating conversations about things that matter.

This community needs a safe place to talk about the world as it is and to imagine the world as it might be.

After Tuesday, the voting will be completed, but the divisions will remain. And the airways will be filled with efforts to demonize the other side.

There needs to be a third way, a commitment not just to be right, but to be righteous. We have learned this before. Righteousness is a relational term. When we speak of righteousness or holiness, we are talking about our relationships. In Danielle Allen's book *Talking to Strangers*, she says the hard thing about democracy is some citizens are always giving things up for others. She says those who win need to provide space for those who lose to be included. She calls it political friendship. She says that this

is how communities hold together.³

We have said before, the world tells you that you need to be right about the issues. That's important work, to discern what the teaching of Jesus has to say to the issues we face every day. But what the faith knows is that as soon as we think we are right, we might be tempted to say to others, it is not lawful for me to associate with you, because I'm right and you are wrong.

But this story says, once you discern you are right, it's not enough. You have to also be righteous. That is relational work. And that work takes the form of conversation.

Sometimes it's the only way people who are right can discern what God is really up to.

¹Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (2020), p. 75

²Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), p. 2

³Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, p. 119

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.