

A Recipe for Community
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 10:1-17, 34-35

I wouldn't call myself a world traveler by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, when my family goes on any sort of vacation together we usually head up to stay with family in Maine... which is lovely but hardly exotic. I can tell you where to find the best lobster roll within a 40 mile circle of Acadia, but don't even try to find a decent pizza.

When we have the opportunity to set our destinations a little wider, part of the excitement of travel can be trying new and strange foods. The first time I went on a mission trip with Simply Smiles, I remember eating "chapulinas" in Oaxaca City. For those of you who may not know, I'm talking about fried grasshoppers. Kids in southern Mexico eat chapulinas like popcorn (it's much more nutritious, too!). I learned that when you toss some bugs in a pan with some olive oil and sea salt and a little lime juice, and they are actually quite tasty! You just have to watch out for the legs, they tend to stick in between your teeth.

Now, I admit that I was more than a little nervous eating fried grasshoppers that first time. It was a new and strange food (at least to my taste buds). One of the most important things we can do when we travel is to build relationships, whether on a mission trip, a business trip or a family reunion. The polite thing to do is to accept the hospitality we are offered. Seems pretty simple, right?

When we travel, the adventure is in learning to live in a strange place, making new friends and sometimes even eating new things (often with a side dose of humility). I'm grateful that in places like Mexico and Jerusalem, Puerto Rico and Canada I've learned that being offered something that I may have not have really wanted, can open my eyes to a different culture.

Now Peter's reticence to eat the gross stuff on that sheet in his dream was more than just a little cultural fear factor... for him, it was also spiritual. Peter believed, as a practicing Jew, that foods shown to him in the vision were forbidden by God. The revulsion he felt was his body saying 'no' in

obedience. These were the very foods which his people believed, for hundreds of years, that they could not even touch (let alone eat).

The impact of the vision could have stopped there, with Peter deciding to make some bacon wrapped shrimp and call it a day. As the story progresses, we see that the lesson he is about to learn is not just about the food he can eat, but more importantly, the people he can eat with.

When he wakes, Peter receives an invitation that is difficult to refuse. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, thought to be a generous, good and righteous man, sent his servants to go and pick up Peter and take him to his house so that he can open up the gospel to all who have gathered; hungry for the Word.

But there's a problem. Saying 'yes' to that invitation went against everything Peter thought he believed. Cornelius was one of the occupiers, foreign-born, not a child of Abraham. Just associating with him, let alone going to his house, would make Peter unclean. And how would he possibly become ritually pure again, especially if the authorities at the temple were still keeping watch for Jesus Followers?

Peter felt, because of the dream, that it was the right thing to do. Up until that point his world was divided between clean and unclean. This crazy vision, where God invites him to eat "unclean" animals--animals not selected or prepared according to the law handed down to Israel by Moses, pushes him right out of his comfort zone.

Cornelius, though a righteous man, represents everything a Jew should fear: he is a Gentile and a soldier of the Roman Empire. He is a foreign agent of oppression. And as Peter is urged by God to take "unclean food" into his body, likewise he is urged to take this "unclean person" into his community.

This was a really big deal.

Peter came to understand that he was being called to love people. Sure, what he ate was important... but living a life of faith is about more than that. Building community is about who we eat with -- who we allow ourselves to associate with, to worship with -- to live with.

While we have learned to eat different kinds of food these days, we are more divided than ever -- by race and class and language. Take the example of what has been happening racially in this country, it's distressing and painful to see the dividing line and hear the real pain of discrimination suffered by people of color.

For most of my life I've considered myself to be racially colorblind. I was raised in an affluent, mostly Caucasian hometown with a few people of color. My parents taught me to be as open as I could be around people who didn't look like me, but it was only when I began attending UCONN where I was exposed to some cultural differences. Like many college students from suburbia, this helped expand my narrow world view.

For example, my first roommate was a young Dominican woman named Milagros. We became great friends, often acting as cultural interpreters for one another in social situations. She often invited me to her home on weekends, a place which was packed with family, music, laughter and great food. I wish we had kept in touch over the years.

Unfortunately, the older I get, the more difficult it seems to make friends across cultural and racial lines. We don't live in a post-racial world, like the pundits of my childhood predicted. The struggle for justice and equality is still being held in places not too far away. In light of this, thinking of myself as 'colorblind' just feels lazy.

The earliest followers of the Way struggled to reconcile identity, law and tradition with Jesus' teachings -- especially since so many people were interested in what he had to say. I think it's tempting, from our modern perspective, to set up Judaism and Christianity as oppositional forces, where Judaism is strict and exclusionary and Christianity is welcoming and liberating.

But that's not really fair.

In reality, the line between Judaism and early Christianity was quite blurry. First century Judaism wasn't a monolithic religion; there was diversity in thought and practice. Practice--no matter what it looked like--was important. Practice was what set Jews apart and made them distinct from everybody else in the ancient Near East. Practice was one of the things that helped the people of Israel survive war, exile, genocide and occupation.

So it's no small thing for Peter to arrive at a place where he says that God shows no partiality; that perhaps converts don't have to observe all those rituals, codes, and customs laid out by Moses. The stakes are always high when it comes to redefining identity--it was true then, and it's true now. That's one reason that change--personal change, social change--can be so traumatic.

When you think about it, Peter is being asked to do something incredibly radical. Can you imagine eating something that you have been conditioned your entire life to see as inedible? It would be like eating dirt, or paper. Seriously, what would it take for you to be willing to go against all your instincts and do something that brave?

Maybe God is calling us, through this ancient story of cultures coming together to be braver than we are today. Perhaps God is calling us to be what Mellody Hobson, chairman of the board of Dreamworks calls "color brave".¹ Instead of participating in a passive diversity in which we respond to the other when they come to us, perhaps we are called, because of who we are in Christ, to go and be among those we might consider the other.

We all have to start someplace. Who is your Cornelius? What might it be like to invite them lunch? Ask them questions about how they see the world and what is important to them. What are their dreams? And listen. Bring our children together for play dates. And listen. Seek out those who might challenge our most basic assumptions, spend time with them, break bread with them. And listen.

When we have a challenge, church, we are compelled to take it on, to show courage, to be bold for the gospel. We are called to be agents of God's love, which we are reminded today: truly has no partiality.

Peter and Cornelius were transformed through their cross-cultural encounter with one another by the love of God. I know that this was true of me, long ago in Mexico: I may have thought I was there to serve in God's name, but I was the one who wound up having my world expanded. Sometimes eating what is set before us, among all the people whom God loves, helps us learn to be loved at the same time as we figure out what it is to love. May it be so, friends, and may it be soon. Amen.

¹ Listen to her TED talk here: https://www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave