

You cannot live long in the Salish Sea region without hearing the phrase, “Seattle Freeze.” I’ve lived here for 18 of the last 20 years and I have some reflections on that phenomenon this morning. Of course, since this is Sunday morning and you’re watching me on Good Shepherd Baptist Church’s Zoom or Facebook Live feed, I’m going to tie those thoughts to the story in Acts 10, which you just heard, and I’m also going to have a few things to say about the events in our broader society. “Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,” is what I was taught – and, no, Karl Barth didn’t say that, although he would probably appreciate the sentiment.

Let’s start with the “Seattle Freeze.” If, by chance, you are unfamiliar with the phrase, it has to do with a phenomenon encountered by many émigrés to our area who have found it difficult to make friends here. Although the term, “Seattle Freeze,” appears not to have made it into print until 2005, the phenomenon was reported on as early as the 1940s. I know that I heard the term during our first sojourn in this area, from January, 2000, through January, 2003. According to the *Seattle Times*, “Newcomers to the area have described Seattleites as being standoffish, cold, distant, and distrustful,” while the [Newcomer’s Handbook for Moving to and Living in Seattle](#) reports that “people are very polite but not particularly friendly.” A more scientific survey from [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#) found that among all 50 states, Washington residents ranked 48th in the personality trait extraversion. A number of theories have been advanced to explain this cultural reserve. The lasting influence of the area’s Scandinavian settlers has been proposed, as has the impact of various Asian cultures. So, too, has the region’s settling by rugged individualist-types. And then, there’s the weather. Seasonal Affective Disorder is a thing when it is cloudy, dark, and rainy for so much of the year, including even the month of the Summer Solstice, known in these parts as “January.”

Now, let me hasten to say that I’ve not really had much encounter with the Seattle Freeze, probably because of the circumstances under which my family and I relocated here on both occasions. As most of you know, I moved here in January of 2000 to become the managing director of Taproot Theatre Company and Connie and the kids joined me that May. At Taproot, we had an instant community – theatre people are good at that, regardless of location. Theatre folk are gypsies, moving from job to job, and, although actors have been permitted to be buried in sacred ground for some time now, theatre folk have generally known the pain of ostracism at some point. To join a cast or a production crew or a volunteer guild or staff of a theatre company, however, is to have instant friends. We band together against the world, whether the world knows it or not.

And, of course, when we returned in 2005, we found family here. A loving welcome is in the DNA of Good Shepherd Baptist Church, ever since the earliest days. Our founding pastor, Bernie Turner, is still remembered for his frequent admonition, “Love everybody.” I’m in touch with Bernie, by the way, through Facebook and e-mail, and I can report that he reads our newsletter weekly and sends his regards to you all more often than I remember to pass them on. But I’m aware that Taproot and Good Shepherd stand out against the norm in our region. I still remember when we moved into our house on Penny Lane 10 years ago and an outraged Colleen, used to the easy hospitality of the South and Midwest, exclaimed after a couple of days at the new address, “NOBODY brought us a casserole!”

If you're wondering where I'm going with this, I think Acts 10 gives us a story of what, in connection with the Seattle Freeze, we might call the Jewish Freeze. Like so much of the human condition, the Old Testament gives us evidence of both poles of the hospitality continuum. There are many beautiful stories of welcome in our Scriptures. When I think of hospitality, I think of Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre and his encounter with the three visitors. But I also remember that Sodom was destroyed, as Jesus taught, for their dreadful rejection of hospitality. And, as Charlie Scalise has taught us, if the Bible teaches against something, there's a pretty good possibility that it was a live problem for God's people, so we must consider God's repeated instructions to care for strangers as proof that they were not being cared for.

Specific to Acts 10 is the connection between Peter's vision of what constitutes an appropriate diet and his interaction with Cornelius. As a good, observant Jew, Peter followed the dietary laws of Torah to the very best of his ability. There were certain foods that he would not, could not eat. I don't know how he felt about green eggs but there was surely no ham in his breakfast. I'm being light-hearted here, but we need to remember just how serious a matter diet was and is for our Jewish sisters and brothers. To observe the guidelines of Torah about one's food was and is for many every bit as important as to observe the commandments against idolatry, murder, adultery, and unchecked desire. To "keep Kosher" is still, for many, a critical part of Jewish identity as God's chosen people. A few years ago, we did a Wednesday night study of what we know as the Deuterocanonical books of the Bible, including the Books of the Maccabees. In both 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Maccabees, we read of the torture and death of "Eleazar, an old and revered priestly leader, and seven brothers for refusing to eat food forbidden by biblical law." Daniel's first clash with Nebuchadnezzar was about diet. We rarely think of what we are free to eat in terms of our relationship with God, but we must honor our spiritual forebears and neighbors for their commitment to this discipline.

What does all this have to do with Peter's interaction with Cornelius? J. Bradley Chance, in his volume on Acts for the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, writes, "Separation from the Gentiles and separation from unclean food went together." He cites Leviticus 20: "I am the LORD your God; I have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean..." The revelation to Peter that in God's eyes no animal was unclean was part of his continuing education that no person was unclean. These were lessons that Peter had to keep learning, which is pretty much normal human nature. After all, he had been with Jesus when Jesus taught that "whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer." (Thus he declared all foods clean.) That's from Mark, chapter 7, and tradition tells us that Mark wrote his Gospel based on what he'd learned from Peter. And Peter had been with Jesus when he subsequently encountered the Syrophenician woman, the one who stood her ground with Jesus and said, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," and then when he healed the deaf man in Decapolis, probably also a Gentile. This was a long, hard road for Peter to learn to embrace Gentiles as sisters and brothers.

Let's not forget that this particular Gentile, Cornelius, would have been particularly difficult for Peter to embrace. Look at how he is introduced in Acts 10: "a centurion of the Italian Cohort." He was a military commander, roughly equivalent to a Captain in today's U.S. Army, probably with about 100 men under his command. His "century" was one of six in the Italian Cohort,

which we know was made up of soldiers from Italy itself, unlike much of the Roman Army, all of them Roman citizens. Remember that the Judeans and Galileans had been under occupation by this army for the last 100 years, with all that goes along with an occupying army – an imposed government and taxes, preemptory justice with torture and executions, abuse of the common folk ranging from theft to rape to murder. Luke tells his readers that Cornelius “was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” He was, in common parlance, a “good” Roman. But Peter didn’t know that.

So we can imagine what a shock Peter must have felt when, after hearing the Holy Spirit tell him that he was to go with the men searching for him for they had been sent by the Spirit, he discovered that he was to go to the home of this likely enemy of his people. And we can imagine what soul searching led him to say, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Peter has been caught in the paradox of the Scriptures which taught separation from the Gentiles but also that the children of Abraham would be a blessing to all nations and that Israel, according to the Prophet Isaiah, would be a light to the nations. Just as with the abolition of diet restrictions by Jesus and the dream of the animals on the sheet, Peter must come face to face with this “Roman of the Romans” to remember that Jesus had commissioned the disciples to go, not only to the Galileans and Judeans, but “to the Samaritans and to the ends of the earth.” Or, as John’s Gospel puts it, God so loved the whole world, that the Son was sent for them, so that “whosoever believeth in him should not perish” but have the life of the age to come.

The Holy Spirit, appropriately for our extended season of Pentecost, is active throughout this story. Not only does she speak to Peter, she “falls upon” and is “poured out upon” the Gentiles of Cornelius’ household. Again, this may have astonished Peter. There is a targum, that is, a translation and commentary on Torah, from some centuries later that documents what may well have been an understanding of some verses in Exodus dating as far back as the first century. Exodus 33:16, in our received text, tells of Moses saying to God, “For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.” But the tradition recorded in the targum adds this sign of the special relationship between God and Israel, “in the withholdment of the Spirit of prophecy from the nations, and by Thy speaking by the Holy Spirit to me and to Thy people, that we may be distinguished from all the peoples upon the face of the earth.” In other words, God was not expected to speak to Gentiles. But in Cornelius’ house, Peter witnesses just that. His mind was blown and his heart was opened. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

What followed, according to the rest of the book of Acts and Paul’s letters, was several decades of “yeah, but...” Yeah, but they still ought to keep kosher. Yeah, but they still ought to be circumcised. Yeah, but you still shouldn’t eat with them. Yeah, but would you want your sister to marry one? Oh, wait, that last one’s not in the Scriptures. That was what my dad said to me when I was a teenager about “those people,” which in our not-quite-convinced-by-the-Civil-Rights-Movement household meant Black people. And gays and lesbians. And probably, if there had been any to speak of in our St. Louis suburb, Latinos and Asian folks, too. Which brings me to the newspaper portion of this sermon.

My friends, our nation is convulsed right now with the painful experience of facing centuries of racism head on. I am hopeful, as I know many of you are, that these are the birth pangs of a change in our society that will result in something closer to the Beloved Community than we have yet experienced in the United States. But we can't take that for granted. We must continue to support, with our voices and our wallets, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Poor People's Campaign, the LGBTQ Pride movement, and all other groups that stand for equity, for justice, and for the loving fellowship of all people. We must do our part to vote out any elected leaders who would look at marching Klansmen and neo-Nazis and say, "many fine people." We must do our part to remind our nation that "Antifa" is not a terrorist group but a shorthand for antifacists, a cause that our nation fought a war for not 80 years ago, when we defeated Hitler, Mussolini, and the Empire of Japan. We must stand up for systemic change in banking, real estate, health care, law enforcement and the legal system, and every other societal construct that works to discriminate against our sisters and brothers based on the color of their skin, the weight of their wallets, or how they experience gender.

But as we do this, we must remember the lessons taught by Jesus and by Paul, who wrote, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Those who are caught up in our corrupted systems as their agents are not our enemies but sisters and brothers to be loved and called out of the darkness. In his online commentary on our passage, Larry Broding writes: "Cornelius was a 'righteous Gentile,' someone who worshiped the Jewish God and showed partiality to the Jews. According to Acts, Cornelius' worship and almsgiving to God's chosen were impeccable. However, Cornelius did not convert; conversion to Judaism meant resigning his commission in the Army, since military service required offering incense to an image of the Emperor as a sign of allegiance. Offering incense to the Emperor's image was considered to be idolatry to Jews." And we have no evidence that he left the Army after his conversion to Christianity, either. Was he truly a follower of Christ? Well, Peter thought so and I think Peter would know. So, let's remember to look with a merciful and loving eye upon those whom many in our cities today consider "the occupying enemy" – the police. Yes, we need to reimagine law enforcement, up to and including "defunding the police." Yes, many police officers are unfit for their jobs. Those who have participated in murder, assault, harassment, and instigation need to be fired and prosecuted. Those of us who stand for justice and mercy must take the sides of their victims. But we are also called to justice and mercy even for the perpetrators and at no time is a statement that describes a group of people with the actions of some of its member appropriate. It's very tempting these days to say, "All police... all White people... all men..." but that is just as destructive as saying "All Black people... all Latinos... all Swedes... all Norwegians... all women... all gay men..."

Who are the Gentiles in our lives? Who is the Cornelius? Who is it that we believe cannot be used by God, who will never be spoken through by the Holy Spirit? We may rightly rebuke actions and words. We may rightly call individuals to account. We may rightly ask, "How can you be an agent of change in your situation," and hold people to perform what they answer. But first and foremost, we are called to love, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God, and Mother of us all. Amen.