

Sermon: Fifth Sunday of Easter: District Convention

Text: Acts 11:1-18

Theme: Inside Out



Back in 2016, when I still lived in Melbourne, the chairman of my then congregation invited me to the MCG. His team, Richmond, were playing my team, Adelaide. What I didn't realise when I said yes was that I would be sitting right in the middle of the Richmond members' area. There I was, with my Crows scarf and cap, surrounded by a seething mass of yellow and black, only five seats away from the Richmond Cheer Squad. It was a bittersweet experience: Adelaide won by ten goals but I couldn't express the joy within. I learnt that day what it felt like to be an outsider.

Insiders and outsiders. The Apostle Peter had lived his life as an insider; a Jewish person growing up in a Jewish community, seeking to faithfully follow God as he had been taught. But when Jesus called Peter from his nets to follow him, this was the beginning of a long journey from inside to outside. Jesus showed through his words, his love and compassion, and ultimately through his cross, that there were no longer insiders and outsiders, but God wanted all people to become members of his kingdom.

Pentecost Day was the next big step on this journey for Peter. He and the other disciples declared the wonders of God in the tongues of the many nations who were present in Jerusalem that day. Peter explained what was happening through the words of the prophet Joel: **"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."** And so began the outward move of the church, from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, as Jesus commanded his disciples before his ascension.

The good news had legs, and it had now reached Joppa, some sixty kilometres from Jerusalem. Peter is staying at the house of Simon the Tanner. A tanner was considered to be an unclean occupation, and so a faithful Jew should not have been staying there. But this doesn't seem to bother Peter, and nor does it seem to bother God, because it's here in Simon's house where two miracles take place. The first is the vision that God gives Peter and the second is a knock at the door which confirms what God has just shown Peter in this vision.

In Acts chapter eleven, Peter shares the story of what had happened with a somewhat sceptical audience of **"the apostles and the brothers."** Even those on the inside haven't yet grasped the length and breadth of God's grace. This is clear from their criticism of Peter. **"You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."** Why was this such an issue? Because receiving the hospitality of outsiders would contaminate you spiritually. A faithful worshipper of God should quarantine themselves from this kind of contact. Remember how Jesus was constantly in trouble with the Pharisees for eating with tax collectors and sinners.

So Peter carefully steps the other apostles through what happened to him. As he was praying, he fell into a trance. **"I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'"**

This was going too far. **"Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth."** This was the right answer according to the old covenant. These animals were ritually unclean, and avoiding them was part of the way that Jewish people distinguished themselves from the non-Jews, known as Gentiles. But a brave new world was being birthed through the gospel. **"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."** And just to make sure Peter gets the message, God says this three times. It must be something about Peter. Three denials, a three-stage reinstatement. Perhaps he's just a slow learner.

After this, Peter receives another word from the Spirit: **"Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."** And with that, God sends Peter on a mission to the ultimate outsider, the centurion Cornelius, who lives sixty kilometres away in Caesarea. God also had an open line to him and told him to send some people to get Peter to come to him. This man whom he had never met would have for him **"a message through which you and all your entire household will be saved."**

So when Peter shares the good news of forgiveness of sins through Jesus' name for everyone who believes in him, **"suddenly the Holy Spirit filled those were listening to Peter's words."** It's then that the penny dropped. The good news is for all people. The logic is simple. If God sent his Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his friends, just as he did to the apostles on Pentecost Day, then we no longer need to play the game of insiders and outsiders. Peter sums it up: **"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right...everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."**

There was stunned silence from the apostles and brothers. That's not surprising. God had turned their spiritual worldview upside down. It was clear that what Peter had recounted to them was the work of God, from beginning to end. What could they do but praise God for the fact that **"even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."** Everything had changed. God had gone global.

Where do you fit in this story? Are you an insider or an outsider? We may consider ourselves as insiders in our congregation, or indeed with God. The stark truth is that we all began life as outsiders from God. Our sin, both original, and actual, disqualified us being part of God's kingdom, and we faced the future of a life separated from God, and estranged from each other and God's good creation.

The early church's "Aha" moment is a word of life and hope for you and me. We are on the inside with God because has also granted to us the **"repentance that leads to life."** This wasn't because God looked at us and determined that we met the criteria for kingdom membership. Nothing can be further from the truth.

Rather, it's only because of the grace that he has shown us in Jesus Christ. Jesus has transformed us from outsiders into insiders through his cross. He came to live in this world as a human being. God's insider became an outsider to carry our sin and to suffer the holy anger of his Father against all sin and evil, and taking on himself the sentence of death.

The grace of God has turned us inside out. We were unclean, but we have been made clean. In his letter to Titus, Paul tells us that “**Jesus gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.**” When we were baptised, we received the forgiveness of sins, and we continue to receive this gift when we call on Jesus' name. Each and every day. We don't graduate from grace, because we still struggle with sin, each and every day. We constantly need the forgiving love of the Father, because our inclination is to turn inward, and to do what suits us, rather than looking outward, to serve others.

Congregations are like people too. Sometimes they get stuck on themselves. Their default position is for things to be the way we like them. Here too God's Spirit is constantly at work to turn us inside out, so that those people who are not yet part of us are in our hearts, minds and prayers. We are part of this congregation solely through God's grace. Those outside are also people for whom Jesus died. He calls us to live inside out, for their sake, so that his Spirit may also lead them to repentance, as he has us.

We're living in an unsettled world. Our economic future is uncertain, our national security precarious, and many people are anxious and losing hope in a positive future. There's an epidemic of loneliness in the young as well as the old. Social commentators are observing that there is an increasing openness to talk about spirituality and even Christianity. This is most marked amongst those who are young adults, and churches across the board are seeing an increase in attendance by the generation aged 16-30.

God has provided a perfect solution to the crisis of meaning and the rising epidemic of loneliness. It's called the church, your church and mine, communities of people who follow Jesus across this District. God “**wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.**” We live out the truth of these words through the way we welcome all those who do make it inside our church buildings, and also the way in which we go out from there and live with integrity and model grace and truth, praying that those we meet will be struck by the love of God seen in and through us.

God, may those people living around us, wherever we live, receive the same gift as we have, the gift of your Holy Spirit, repentance that leads to life. Lead us in love to love them. Amen.