

Sermon “A Tough Sell”
Kirk of St James
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In today’s world of influencers, and on-line personalities branding is important because it is what you become known for or associated with. Knowing your brand helps you build up your following and create content that appeals to others. For example, there is the Holderness Family, who are well known for their quirky songs and videos about family life. One of their newest ones is about Maycember, that wonderful time of year where life gets incredibly busy as things prepare to finish before the summer. We rate dogs started as a funny site where you could send in a photo of your dog to get rated out of ten with a cute or funny comment and has since raised over 1.3 million dollars to help shelter animals with serious health needs. While there are certainly a lot of wonderful stories, or simply light and humorous ones from sites like these there is another side to this world. A recent documentary looked at the life of Ruby Franke who was lauded as one of the top family vloggers with her YouTube channel “Eight Passengers,” posting wholesome content and featured in numerous brand deals, only to later be arrested and charged for child abuse. The allegations were so far from the image and the brand she projected it was difficult to reconcile until the layers started being peeled away. When we come to understand someone or something in a specific context, it can be incredibly difficult to shift our thinking when new information becomes known.

When we read about Peter this morning it is easy to miss how revolutionary his message is for those around him. They have come to understand him in a specific context and understand their faith in a precise way and suddenly he has gone outside of that box, and he is made to answer for it in front of the leaders in Jerusalem. Now during this time there was anxiety and division within the Jerusalem community. This group of hardliners within the larger group are aghast at the idea of Peter breaking the rules. He has gone into the home of uncircumcised men and eaten with them. Luke as a writer tends to be precise, our New Testament professor always referred to him as Dr. Luke. However, there are a few times within Luke and Acts when we

come across something called a Lukan triade. It occurs when he retells a story more than once, in order that the theological layers and its importance can be clearly understand. So, this story has already been told a chapter previously, and now it is being retold with greater detail.

What does it matter who Peter eats with? How does it hold any significance at all? Well, Jesus had once been accused of something similar, so it was clear it was important. Pulling from biblical scholar N.T Wright, we have some background information that is helpful. While normally anything related to Rome had a negative connotation, but this particular Roman named Cornelious overturns the stereotype. He is a no-nonsense Roman soldier, and an officer in the army everyone in the world feared. Caesarea was an important garrison town, because it was a port where Herod the Great forced all traders to come through and pay a tax when they did. If you were not a great soldier there were a lot of backwaters you could be sent to, but this was not one—it was a key port in a key strategic zone. Any centurion (an officer with one hundred men under him) posted here was good at what they did. While sometimes the Romans liked to rile things up, much like Pilate, Cornelius was different. He was devout, he was respectful, he was a seeker after God and generous with his money. He was respected not only by his Roman peers, but also by the Jewish community in his neighbourhood. With this reputation what was the issue for the Jewish leaders?

Jewish food laws were important, and if you look in Leviticus you see an entire range of items they were not to eat. Following these food laws were one of the ways that the Israelites became distinct from their non-Jewish neighbours, and they were also forbidden from sharing table fellowship with non-Jews. These were rules that the Israelites followed from the time of Leviticus on. When you build something into not only your routines but also your beliefs, it would be nearly impossible to imagine disregarding them like this. Not nearly as important but just to give you an idea behind the thinking, how hard would it be, if suddenly we found out that we should celebrate Christmas on August 13th because that would be a more accurate time. It would be hard to let go of all of the habits and customs we have formed around December 24th. Something that has been built into your life as a constant is now in flux, and that is never a

good feeling. Up until this point in time most (but not all) of the early Christians were made up of Jewish believers. Suddenly Gentiles had been admitted as full members of the new and rapidly developing Jesus-family without having to become Jews in the process. Further to this point, “People were not, in other words, sitting around in Jerusalem discussing, as an abstract issue, the question of the value of circumcision and the food laws. These were the equivalents of the national flag at a time when the whole nation felt under intense and increasing pressure. To welcome Gentiles as equal brothers and sisters must have looked like fraternizing with the enemy.” We know only all too well what it feels like to have your flag threatened. No wonder the response was so strong.

I have long underestimated the importance of this moment in our Christian history. If this moment had gone badly, it could have led to schism in the church. What Peter is advocating for is not an easy sell by any stretch of the imagination. Often, when we are called in to defend our position, or show the reason behind our logic and decision making, we come in on the offensive. Peter is being criticized and made to answer for eating with Cornelius. I can imagine wanting to come in with the perfect argument, or frustrated, or fill in any number of emotions. Instead, Peter does something unusual—he tells a story. It is not logic, the perfect argument, or anything else that changes the minds of the people gathered. A couple amazing things happen in this moment. The first is Peter's calmness and openness. “Had Peter come to argue theological points with them or debate doctrinal differences, he might not have changed their hearts. Generally, arguments tend only to crystalize differences. Debates tend to keep two sides apart. In debates and arguments, there are winners and losers.” I can only imagine how long an argument like this could have gone on for.

Instead, Peter invites them into a story—the vision came to him, he was called by others to heal, preach, and baptize. God was working through Peter and who was he to deny that? It is likely not a coincidence that Jesus almost never argued, instead he told parables, inviting people into the story, to sit along side of him, and consider things in a different way. Often the message was open to interpretation at the end allowing people to find their own meaning. The other

amazing thing about this encounter was that the leaders were willing to consider other views. It came up last week during the Luther in Springtime study about how we are a reformed and always reforming faith. Which means that nothing is written completely in stone, and sometimes due to new discoveries or new understanding, we might shift our views to take them into consideration. This is a core piece of our identity as Presbyterians.

From the beginning of the Christian movement, people tried to limit or narrow who was included in the message. But while people can sometimes tend toward narrowness, people like Peter were building a bigger table. I came across a great line in my reading that said, “Every time we exclude someone from the full redemptive efforts of God, Peter’s question should trouble us and the church.” What if the church never made it past the status of a small sect in and around Jerusalem? What if Peter’s moment before the leaders went in a totally different direction? We would be a far lesser church because of it.

I want to close today with a quote that says, “The fulfillment of this promise is nowhere more evident than in the boldness of Peter’s testimony in Jerusalem. God empowered Peter, an ordinary fisherman, to play a significant role in the mission of the church. God enables ordinary people to be witnesses to the gospel. This can be frightening because it voids our excuses that we are not gifted enough, not old enough, not young enough, not good enough to get the job done. God has always had the audacity to choose ordinary people to do extraordinary things in the service of God’s reign. Such a realization should give us hope and strengthen our resolve...” For two hundred years this congregation has heard and followed God’s call, through ordinary and extraordinary times, may we continue to answer our call as bravely as Peter, and with the wisdom of the leaders who were able to listen when the word of God was spoken.