

Sermon: The church is not a gated community

Acts 11:1-18

Rev Dr Jos Strengholt

Here in Egypt we see more and more gated communities being built. Beautiful resorts where the rich cluster together behind a high fence. You can only enter the area by passing security men who may even check your car for bombs with their dogs.

These high fences and solid gates and security controls are to keep evil out and to give a great sense of security and togetherness for the people who pay millions to live inside such areas.

They have a point, don't they? The wrong people in your neighborhood can create big problems.

1 Peter, what company do you seek?

"Bad company spoils good manners"

So when St Peter, maybe 5 or 10 years after the church in Jerusalem was founded, had visited a Roman Centurion - an army leader - in the city of Caesarea, and he had eaten with him, imagine, many of the Jewish Christians were very upset.

They argued as a gated community; you cannot let gentile soldiers from Rome enter through the gates of baptism without the proper procedures of circumcising them and they must also abide by the whole Jewish rulebook of all dietary laws and more!

"Peter, you entered the home of uncircumcised men and you ate with them!" how dare you. It was as if he was opening the gates of the gated community, as if he was tearing the fences down.

Who do we eat with? That may sound like an innocent question. What's the big deal?

But if I ask, "Who do we allow our children to have close relationships with", it immediately gets another flavor, does it not?

To understand the issue at the time of Peter, we must know a bit of the background, in order to have some sympathy for those who were critical of him. You cannot just eat with anyone, can you?

First, Peter had outraged the ancestral Law and traditions of his Jewish people. Israel had, in its holy books, very precise dietary laws.

These laws were given by God. They controlled every facet of their everyday lives. Eat this, eat not that. No shrimps, no pork, and many other regulations. These laws were given by God, so you better stick to it!

These laws were important to protect the people of God from assimilation with the gentile nations around them. They ensured that a Jew remained a Jew.

And at that particular time of Israel's history, there were grave tensions between the Roman occupiers and Israel.

Emperor Gaius Caligula in Rome, at that particular time, took some dramatic actions against the Jews. The foremost Jewish historian in that time, Josephus, writes,

Gaius dispatched [...] his envoy to Syria [...] His orders were to lead a large force into Judaea and, if the Jews consented to receive him, to set up an image of Gaius in the temple of God. If, however, they were obstinate, he was to subdue them by force of arms and so set it up.

Imagine - an idol in the Temple in Jerusalem. This tense situation was resolved after a mass demonstration by the Jews; the statue was not put in the temple after all.

But the event signifies the very bad relationships between Israel and the occupying forces of Rome that would, in 70AD, lead to the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

And Peter went to one of the Roman enemy army officers, to eat with him. This showed exactly why for many Jews and Jewish Christians it was so important to stick to the dietary laws and maintain the separation between "us", the good people of God, and those "others", the enemies, the bad people.

Those Jewish Christians responded just as we usually do. We also have an inclination to draw up the walls of the church, make us different from all others, even by our own self-invented laws and habits. As long as we can keep our kids away from dangerous "others". As long as others do not rock our boat.

It is a normal social habit, so the sociologists tell us, that if we are a group, we create an image of outsiders that is worse than the reality, and we create our walls to keep our church, or whatever group we are part of, "pure". And if we allow breaches in the walls of our community, many people feel endangered. It feels like an attack on our identity.

2 The company that God seeks

So Peter, how could you do this? We live in dangerous times. The church is under attack; we have to close ranks!

Peter then explains.

First, God gave him a vision while he prayed, three times. And at the same time, God had sent an angel to Cornelius to send for Peter. "Peter will have a message for you by which you and your household shall be saved", said the angel to Cornelius.

Then Peter found three men waiting at his door, sent by Cornelius. And the Spirit then told Peter to go with those men.

Finally, when Peter began to preach to them, even before he was finished, the Holy Spirit fell on those uncircumcised, unclean gentile men, on Cornelius and his household.

So Peter underlined how the whole event was led by God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and he mentions that he had brought six good Jewish Christian men with him as witnesses to it all.

"This is what truly happened; these are the facts", and Peter then explains them that the Holy Spirit fell on those gentile military men, on these enemies of Israel, just as He had fallen on the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

Peter refers to Jesus' statement that John the Baptist baptized with water but that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. That was spoken to Jews only, but Peter freely applies it also to these gentiles.

"Who was I to stand in God's way?" is what Peter asks his critics. So he baptized the Roman soldier, without circumcising him, and he stayed in his house to eat with him.

Now that eating, that was really what the Jewish critics of Peter found most difficult. That is why Peter explained his God-given vision.

He saw something like a great sheet coming down from heaven, being let down from heaven. And in the sheet he saw animals - both clean and unclean. Peter is told to kill and eat - even to eat the animals that were unclean according to Jewish laws.

After Peter saw this same thing three times, the sheet was drawn up into heaven again.

Notice that clean and unclean animals descended from heaven and ascended into heaven. Under Moses this would have been impossible - but this vision allows for unclean animals to be with God. Shocking for any Jew who knew his law book.

And to underline how radical this vision was, a voice from heaven said: "What God has made clean, do not call unclean." In other words, there is no longer clean and unclean food.

In Mark 7:19, we come across that same idea. Jesus there said that “whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach.” Mark then comments, “Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean.”

It is important to see that the story of Peter combines this issue of what food you eat, with the people you can be in close contact with. For God no food is unclean and no person is outside the pale of redemption. Even not those who seem to be completely opposed to the people of God and their faith.

3 Gospel crosses differences

Christianity could easily have become another kind of strict, closed, Judaism. All the first Christians were Jews and the whole tradition and outlook of Judaism would have moved them to keep this new wonder to themselves and to believe that God could not possibly have meant it for the Gentiles.

Or at best, gentiles could have been saved by becoming Jewish through circumcision and by sticking to all the laws of the Jewish Bible.

This incident is a notable mile-stone on the road along which the Church was groping its way to the conception of a world, a whole world, for Jesus Christ.

God himself invited the gentiles to participate fully as full citizens of his kingdom, as full members of his church, as true ‘Jews’ in his new Israel.

Those gentiles were not accepted by God as secondary citizens, but as full members of the body of Jesus Christ, saved, filled with the Spirit.

Surely, these Christian gentiles, they changed. They adopted the Jewish beliefs. The Christian faith is to a large extent Jewish in content.

But the Christian Jews also adapted their beliefs. God removed the distinction between clean and unclean animals, and between clean and unclean people. The early church had to go through many struggles and debates in order to accept this and to live by it.

And what about us?

Where do we put the borderlines between us as Christians and people outside?

Does the nation where you are from, have enemies? How do we deal with those people, even in church?

Peter's community of Christians had real enemies, the Romans, but he went to them, ate with them, and spoke about the Gospel.

Here in Egypt the "enemies" are well defined by the authorities. They are the radical Muslims, and anyone criticizing the state. Are we able to related to them with the love of God? For Him, they are not unclean.

I completely support the idea that we must help our children to seek for good company. Bad company can easily spoil their manners.

But for the church as a whole, for mature members of the church of Christ, there is no excuse to lock ourselves into our safe gated community. God has called us as a church to be in this world. So that is where we must be. We must be in the world, open to all people.

But in this world, we have to be as Jesus. We are called to serve all people, to love our enemies; to do good to those that do not treat us well. That is, we are not of this world. We bring Christ and his love into the world.

We all have our own "food laws", or at least, habits and rules, that separate us from others. Just question yourself a bit this week - what are your habits that keep others away from you? Or what do we do as a community to make it unattractive for others to join us?

God has called us to be in this world. But he also called us to be a light in this world. That only works if the walls are thin and low.

Our Christian vocation - for all of us - is to grow mature and to be that light, to be present in the societies we are part of, and not to hide in our subcultures, our safe havens, our comfort zones.

Surely, the core of our faith, and the love we have for God and all people, that must never change by our life in this world.

But as a church-community we must be open to this world, and the painful reality for the Jewish Christians in the beginning of church history, and for us today, is that if "others" join our community, the community changes. There is no way around it.

The church of Jesus Christ is always in flux, always changing, always adapting. That may at times be scary, but we have the example of Peter and the early church.

Conclusion

So, in order to be what Christ wants us to be in this world, we must not allow our man-made rules and habits to push people away.

And we cannot allow our fear of others, our fear that they may influence and change us, we cannot allow that fear to make us build walls around the church. The church is not meant to be a gated community.

We should be bridge builders rather. People reaching out, with love and truth, to all people we meet, and we do that with an open heart and with open hands. That may make us vulnerable, but well, then we are really as Jesus Christ in this world.

Amen