

August 3, 2014
Church Planting
The Day the Law Died
Acts 10:9-23a

Opening words: If you have been with me the last several weeks, then you know I am preaching through the book of Acts. I have called this entire body of work *Church Planting*. It will take me several summers to complete. This summer we are looking at chapters nine through twelve. If you want to understand these chapters, then you have to understand the geography of the area. I am summarizing what I covered this summer so you will learn the stories. Our Biblical understanding is weak.

Chapter nine begins in the Golden City of Jerusalem. Christian persecutions had become a reality, and the church scattered for her own protection. The man heading the persecutions was a man by the name of Saul. As a matter of fact, he was in charge of the lynch mob when Stephen was martyred. His zealous behavior against the church is well known. As the church flees Jerusalem, Saul is right behind them. For this reason he travels 140 miles to Damascus. It is on that journey that God stops Saul. As he neared the city, he was confronted by Jesus himself. The resurrected Jesus spoke to him directly. He asked him, "Why do you persecute me?" That question changed everything. A short time later, Saul was converted and was helped by two men, Ananias and Barnabas. Without them, his ministry would have ended before it began.

Without warning, the editor switches the storyline back to Peter. He was in the city of Lydda, where he healed a paralytic. The news of that miracle spread throughout the entire region. One of the communities that heard about that healing was Joppa. There was a woman in that community who needed a miracle. However, it was too late. Tabitha is already dead when Peter arrived. He is moved by the testimony of her life, and resurrects her. Can I state the obvious? The healing of the paralytic and the resurrection of Tabitha caused many to believe. That brings us to last week.

The focal point of the story moves again. This time it is the city of Caesarea, 30 miles to the north of Joppa. In that community, there is a soldier by the name of Cornelius. He and his entire family were God fearing. They were spiritually alive and had compassion on the poor. Those acts drew the attention of God. In a vision, he was told to bring Peter to his neighborhood. That brings us to today's reading, Acts 10:9-23a. Let me call this message *The Day the Law Died*.

Acts 10:9-23a About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three^[a] men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

²² The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

According to the text, it is about noon, and Peter is near Caesarea. He finds the home of a fellow disciple and ascends the stairs to the flat roof. That sounds odd to our ears, but it was common in those days. Homes were built with flat roofs for privacy. Peter wanted to use that privacy to pray. However, prayer must have been difficult, because he was hungry. Just think about it for a minute. It is noon and he is hungry. That makes it lunch time.

I don't want to shock you, but I like lunch. It is one of my three favorite meals. I am not a picky eater. I will eat anything for lunch, anywhere. Several times a week, I meet for lunch in a local restaurant with various friends. The best is when I meet Kathryn for lunch. However, I never complain when I eat lunch at home. I have eaten many leftovers for lunch through the years. There is nothing better than a cold slice of pizza, cold pasta or a cold baked potato with some sour cream. In my time, I have eaten gallons of ramen noodles. They are cheap and ready in just three minutes. I have never met a sandwich I didn't like. There is nothing better than a roast beef and Colby cheese sandwich with horseradish. My favorite beverage with that is a tall glass of buttermilk. Don't get me started on goose liver and onion on a cracker with mustard. I consider that treat the food of kings. One time I even ate goat soup for lunch. Do I have to go on? This is the point: I am not a picky eater.

Peter was a picky eater. He only ate certain things. It wasn't that he didn't like them. He had never eaten them because they were not permitted in the Old Testament law. Never forget, Peter was Jewish. From the very beginning of his life, his diet was controlled by the law. Leviticus 11 laid out what was permitted and what was not permitted. You have to understand that fact to appreciate what happens next. According to the text, as he waits for his lunch to be delivered, Peter falls into a trance. He sees food. (Have you ever dreamed about food? I have.)

He sees a giant picnic filled with everything he has never been permitted to eat. It is too good to be true. God basically says to him in verse 13, "Chow down!" Peter protests because change has always been hard. God tells him nothing is off limits, everything is good. Peter must have never forgotten that day. It was the day the law died. Without the law, Peter's life became simpler. Just think about it for a moment.

Did you know the Old Testament contains 613 laws? Three hundred and sixty five are negative in nature. Two hundred and forty eight are positive. You can classify those laws into three groups. The first group are the self-evident laws, such as not to murder or steal. The second group deals with religious duty or tradition, such as keeping the Sabbath holy. The third group are random laws. They don't fall into any particular category. In addition to the 613 laws, the Pharisees, experts on the law, created other laws to protect the original laws. You would think 613 laws would be enough. If you think 613 laws are enough, then say, "**Amen!**" The problem is, the world is always creating more laws.

In the mid nineteenth century, the world started working on something called "international law". Countless hours have been spent in the League of Nations and the United Nations trying to refine international law. It sounds simple but it is complex. How do you distill all the laws in our world and find common ground? Every culture looks at the world in a different way. International law has become a big deal because our world is growing smaller, due to advances in transportation and communication. Everyone is saying that international law was broken in eastern Ukraine and the Middle East. International law is important if we are ever going to have world peace. We have a long way to go.

Someone once said the United States, or any nation, is nothing more than a series of laws. On the fourth of July the United States turned 238 years old. Over that time period, our government has produced many laws. They are necessary to regulate behavior. They are not all bad; some laws are good. I am all for the law that says you can't drive your car down the sidewalk. Without it, people would get killed. I am for the law that says you must pass through airport security before you get on a plane. Our world is a violent place. I am for the law that says convicted sex offenders must register, because it protects our young. I am for the law that says that says everyone can own property and vote. I am for the laws that ban any form of discrimination. I am not so sure about the Ohio law that says it is illegal to fish for whales on Sunday. However, I am for the law that does not permit dueling. You would think between international law and national law, we would have enough laws. But wait, there are more!

Every organization has its own laws. The church is no exception. In the church, we call laws "rules". They do the same thing. The United Methodist Church has certain rules we must follow. They are all found in the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*.

Did you know we are required to audit the books of every account of every organization in the local church every year? Did you know no alcohol can be consumed within any United Methodist Church building? Did you know there will be no gambling or games of chance, within any United Methodist Church building? Did you know we are required to have an annual Charge Conference? Did you know I am required to go to Annual Conference? Did you know, at my ordination, I had to promise to be itinerant? In other words, I must go where the bishop sends me. Did you know we are permitted to borrow money from ourselves, but it must be paid back? The United Methodist Book of Discipline is filled with rules we are required to follow. I find it to be exhausting. But wait, there are more!

Every local church has rules. There are some churches who have more rules than they do people. In my opinion, that is part of the problem. We are no exception. We have our fair share of them. How many rules can you name? Most are based on common sense, but everyone has a different standard. Maybe you have heard these in the past? If you are going to use the kitchen, then clean the kitchen afterwards. If you are going to use a cup, then wash your cup. There will be no food left in the refrigerator. (That is why I leave my food on the altar.) You will make sure the entire church is locked if you are the last one out. You will make sure all the lights are out in the entire church if you are the last one out. If you want to be refunded for any church expense, then you must have a receipt. One of the reasons I don't spend a great deal of time in my office is I can't remember all the rules. I don't want to be reprimanded. If you think we have enough rules, then say, "**Amen!**"

One of the reasons I love Jesus is that he only had two rules. I can remember them. (Matthew 22:36-40) First, you are to love God with all your heart, mind and soul. In other words, you are to love God completely. Second, you are to love your neighbor as yourself. Church work is not hard; we make it hard. In the life of the church, all we have to do is talk about Jesus and help the poor. Everything else we do is optional. Everything else is distractive. Everything else can be eliminated. In the scripture lesson for today, Peter was told the law was eliminated; the only thing that really mattered was Jesus. If you think you can remember that, say, "**Amen!**" Jesus is bigger than the law.

When I came to Western Reserve, I inherited a mid-week program by the name of Youth Club. Some of you participated. On Wednesday, the children would come and gather for a lesson and dinner. Those who ran it did a wonderful job. Everyone, regardless of age, had fun. One day the youngest class was out in the narthex, standing near the glass looking into the courtyard. They were all fixated on the courtyard, because the Christmas decorations had just been put up. The plastic Christmas figures were on display. The group had their noses pressed against the window. It was like one of those Norman Rockwell scenes. The teacher tried to hold them back, because there was a rule about touching the glass. The glass had to be spotless. I have never been a fan of rules. I said, "Let them go!"

That is why they make glass cleaner! We have to keep Windex in business." Then I got a better idea. Why not let the class out into the courtyard and experience the figurines for themselves. They were just the right size. They were the same size as the images. I walked to the door to open it, when the teacher told me to stop. She said, "Russ, you are new. No one is allowed to go into the courtyard, especially at Christmas. Those figures are sacred." I thought, those figures are plastic, and to be honest with you, they were tacky. I said to the teacher, "Aren't we supposed to be introducing our children to Jesus?" She said, "Yes!" I said, "So let's do it." I opened the door and the children flooded into cool fresh air. They didn't go crazy. They were controlled, like they were walking on sacred ground. One of the students stood by the camel and grew still. One student hugged Joseph. One went eye to eye with a shepherd and smiled. One touched Mary's face with his fingertips. One kid picked up Jesus and kissed him. He looked at his friend next to him and said, "This is Jesus!" Then, ever so gently, he passed Jesus to him. One by one they took turns holding Jesus. Those children knew at their young age there was something special about those plastic tacky figurines, because there was something sacred about Jesus. There always has been and there always will be.

Will you pray with me?