

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *From Moralism to Sacramental Community*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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Scripture Reading: From Acts 10 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It really is hard, maybe impossible, for us to realize how radical these words were when people [first] heard them. This message of Jesus was not simply a radical, universal view of God, it was a radical, universal view of humankind, of what it means to be human. We talk about it a lot, but it's hard to feel within our bones what it must have felt like the first time that Paul said, "In Christ, (which means in a community of love) there's neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free." Because most people use categories to say what ethics is. Most people say a man should be *this* way, a woman should be *way*, and certainly, most people that have interpreted the Bible through the ages have taken it that way. But look at what Paul is saying: in Christ, there's neither male nor female, not slave or free, so you can't say somebody doesn't count because they don't have money, or somebody counts more if they do have money. But, most radically, I think, in terms of religion, it's saying there isn't Christian and non Christian – there's not Jew or Greek. You don't separate the world – you don't divide the world in any of the comfortable categories that human beings have a tendency to slip into.

Now the word that's translated "nation" in your bulletin is not a great translation. The reason I say that is because the nation-state didn't really exist yet. It says "peoples" and it can mean "nations" but there weren't many of those. Even Greece was like a confederation of city states. There were tribes, there were cultures, there were ethnicities, and that's what's being talked about here. What it's saying is in Christ, none of the human conditions should separate us. They should call us closer together. They'd be differences that make the body stronger and richer.

What I didn't know when I finished Seminary and for years after is that there is an invisible totem pole – a power system in the church, in the country, in a house, in a home, in every club, in every business. People know the pecking order, but you're not supposed to point it out. We say we live in a classless society. If anybody points out discrepancies of power, they're accused of class warfare, but here's the thing: everybody knows there's a pecking order. Now, the lower you are on the pecking order, the clearer that is to you, the more you feel it in your daily life. The higher you get up on [the pecking order], the more it is in your best interest to not notice. So, if you're a white male heterosexual Christian in this culture, it's completely in your interest to pretend like everybody's on the same level. But if you believe there are different types of people and you believe that you're applying one standard, what sneaky human beings can do is say "this one standard for all of us affects some different people differently." That's how somebody like Jefferson [could say] "everybody deserves life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But because people are different, that doesn't apply to some people in the same way.

When I was applying for a [driver's] license in Dallas, Texas years and years ago, I was very afraid of the parallel parking, and rightly so. I think I flunked that part. (Lot of pain in my story.) (*laughter*) The policeman that was evaluating me said, "Oh, don't worry about it." Then he used the "N" word and said, "Even *they* can pass this test." Now, I was pretty clueless, but I knew that's wrong. These were the people that were supposed to be protecting everybody, but to them, there were different kinds of people, so the one law hits different people differently - it's applied differently.

The church, for 2000 years, has said God loves everybody, Jesus loves everybody, Jesus died for everybody, don't judge anyone, but there's always been a "wink", right? We've always known that that doesn't include everybody, and you will literally go on trial if you apply that indiscriminately. *If you apply grace to the wrong people, you will get in trouble in almost any denomination in the country.* Now, that's interesting, isn't it? That here, something so central to the teachings of Jesus Christ - "do not judge!" How clear is that? Do not judge your brothers and sisters. You can't say it any clearer than that and yet, it's got an asterisk by it.

I was doing some - I can't even remember what the cause was - but I was in Virginia doing some activism there, and I met some marriage equity people, people that were trying to get marriage justice for Gay and Lesbian people. As I say, I was in Virginia, and they had these wonderful T-shirts - my favorite activist T-shirt I've ever seen. On the front it said, "Virginia is for Lovers" That's what the tourism signs say, but it had an asterisk on it. And then, when you turned it around, you saw, "Warning! Some restrictions may apply." (*laughter*) There are times when I'm so frustrated with the church that I think we should take the cross down and put an asterisk on it because of all the exceptions that we apply. We have this beautiful universal language, but we have exceptions, or trap-doors. As long as you have one scapegoat in your theology, I would suggest you've not begun to understand Jesus Christ.

*This is a love that doesn't need to be defined by fear or hatred.* It's a love that can shape an entire world view on compassion. And it's not a weakness, it's a strength, it's a power, and it guides us, but here's the thing: to do it, you have to stop judging other people, and there's a major penalty for that. There's a penalty in the church, there's a penalty in the culture, maybe in your home.

I had no idea when I started talking about Gay and Lesbian issues - I started with women's issues and began to understand those - even though I'm very slow, I began to understand this needs to apply to everybody. And as long as I was just talking about it, it was fine. I was staying on the totem pole. I was staying in the power system and was trying to reach out a helping hand, but I wasn't ever going to risk my place in the pecking order, and I thought I was doing that for other people. Right? I'm keeping my credibility so that I can have an impact, so I could have gravity, so I could help other people. That was what I told myself. Until one day, I couldn't lie like that anymore. So, what I did that day - most of you have never seen this (holds up clerical robe) - this is the robe I used to wear. It's real "purty". This is what I got after Seminary. By wearing this, what was being said, I realized, is that I can have privileges that other people can't have. I can be ordained, but there are brothers and sisters that can't be ordained. And so I stopped wearing this. I always thought that when we eventually won the

vote, our procession would be “Back in Black”...you know, by ACDC, (*laughter*) but you realize that that’s just *one* scapegoat. The church is incredibly creative and inventive in finding new ones. So, if I’m going to side with the marginalized, that’s a lifelong curriculum, isn’t it? There will always be somebody outside the gate. So, I’ll keep the robe in my office, but until all are truly welcome in God’s house, we shouldn’t wear it – which is what the stoles are about. When you put on a stole to serve at St. Andrew’s, that’s what the ordination means. It’s not a station, it’s not a status, it’s not a place on the pecking order, it’s a humble service for all of God’s people.

Now, I’m very happy to reach this [historic Presbyterian vote] milestone, but I also realize that it is incredibly bittersweet. I’m happy for my friends who have worked so hard – some of them aren’t alive anymore – to come to this moment. But I feel like – you know when the Pope apologized to Galileo a couple of years ago? That’s what I feel like. Yes, it’s a step forward, but you’ve also carbon-dated that you’re 500 years behind the curve.

Somebody that was joining the church said that they had had a tough road in the Catholic Church. It can happen anywhere. You can’t look at it denominationally. To me, for us to say that we’ve done this ahead of the Methodists or Episcopalians – to me, that’s like two clowns saying who has the longer shoes. (*laughter*) Jesus said, “Don’t judge” and we’re judging, and so we’re a joke. As long as there is an asterisk in our theology, we, the church, are a joke. Watching the Methodists and Episcopalians and Presbyterians jockey on this issue is like watching the Three Stooges go through a door. (*laughter*) Yes, one is ahead of the other, but...it’s all just too pitiful. *The Military got there before we did.* What does that mean? They’re not known for their sensitivity...courage, yes, and all of those things. What does it mean that the Military got to this social justice issue before the church? We weren’t there standing by Dr. King. There was a very small group of people that were there. The church remembers itself as having been there, but we weren’t – not the dominant church. We like to remember ourselves as being there for women’s issues, but we weren’t. *So, to be a member of a major denomination is to be riding the caboose of history.* After everybody else gets an issue...”Hi, we’re here.” That’s not good enough, is it?

So, what we’re being called to is a different understanding of humankind and of theology, and it’s got to be radical, which means it’s not defined by the culture in which you were born. And it’s got to be universal, which means it doesn’t stop with the people that you like.

Now, we’re going to look at a story today because it reminds us of this radical beginning. It’s a story of Peter and Cornelius. Now, Cornelius was a gentile. If you want to know when the church started sliding and letting slackers in, this is where it began – with the gentiles...those stinkin’ gentiles...which is us, right? We need to remember when we raise the bar for everybody else, it had to be lowered for us. Because Cornelius has not been circumcised. He eats unclean food. He *is* unclean. Remember that Peter is an Orthodox Jew. He’s Jewish. So, he, in dealing with Cornelius, is supposed to stay away.

Well, he has a dream one night. This kind of justice has to slip up on you. Nobody wants it. Nobody chooses to do this work. You see it out of the corner of your eye. You try to not see it, and it haunts you. If you’re lucky, you have friends who won’t let you off the hook. But he has this dream and God comes and lays out a picnic, an incredible picnic. And it’s got all the foods

that he likes...all the foods that he's never seen before. But he looks over and he sees pork rinds, or something like that...pork and beans...ham...shrimp. Did you know shrimp is unclean? It's an abomination. Shame on you for eating it. We're talking about the Levitical code, right? The cleanliness codes of the Old Testament. Food is unclean and people are unclean, certain people.

So Peter goes to sleep and he's a conservative. Everything's clear in his little head. He says, "God, I'm not going to eat that. Thank you for the picnic, but I've never eaten anything unclean at all." And I thought Jeff (in the scripture reading) put that edge to the voice. "How dare you? How dare you call unclean what I have called clean?" See, that's my number one feeling this week: the people that have bullied and judged people for decades...*how dare you?* We've spent the last 15 years to say a group of God's children is worthy to be in your presence. *How dare you* put them through this? How can you demean yourself in this way? But *we've* been there, haven't *we*, if not on this issue, a different issue? The universal, radical love of Jesus is something we lose on a regular basis and we have to keep coming back to it.

Well, the conversation happens three times. Remember Peter's three denials? Remember when Jesus comes back again and he says, "Peter, do you love me"? Remember what he said? "Feed my sheep." If you love me, love my people. Care for my people. Now he wakes up and there is Cornelius – the last thing he wanted to see – very confusing. And Cornelius falls on his knees. [Cornelius] is a holy person. He's unclean. He helps people, he loves people, he's very generous, but on the totem pole, he's lower. So Peter says something – I'm sure he was amazed when he said it. This is, I think, when he began to turn. He said, "Get up off your knees. I'm a human being like you." And don't you think he went "Oops!" "I'm a human being just like you." And isn't it true that's how you get every social justice issue? It's not about argumentation. It's not about clever logic. It's when you look across whatever line has been drawn, and you say, "Oh, you're just like me," the change has begun. And even poor Peter, who is not the sharpest scissors in the drawer, says okay, this isn't about food, is it? Jesus didn't come, teach and die so I could eat pork and beans. It's about people. *It's about people.* I realize now that God doesn't choose favorites, doesn't show partiality. It's tough to translate it...doesn't judge by appearances, doesn't judge by human conditions. And he says I realize now that I should call no people unclean. *Don't you wish to God the church had heard that?*

Now, I have a lot of really good friends who say that the reason that they are making other people miserable is because of the Bible. They just want to obey the Bible. Right! Let's look at some of the Bible on sexuality. Let's just spend a couple of minutes here on some of this beautiful "biblical marriage" stuff they talk about. This is from Deuteronomy 22: "If a man rapes a virgin, he is to pay the father money and marry the victim." Did you get that? It's biblical ethics. "If a man rapes a virgin, he is to pay the father money and marry the victim." How many would consider that fair if you were in that situation? (no hands raised) Hmm...hmmm – then maybe you wouldn't want to use that on somebody else, I don't know. "If a man rapes a slave who is engaged to be married, he is to be fined. She is to be beaten." Leviticus 19, and isn't that beautiful? "Children born out of wedlock are not to be allowed in the church down to the tenth generation. Neither are men who have lost their testicles." I had somebody to walk into the first service just as I was saying that. That's Deuteronomy 23. Would you even want to be in a church that checks for that? I mean, we have enough trouble now getting ushers, can you imagine? Conservative people have the gall to say the Bible teaches

that marriage is between one man and one woman, and may I respectfully say, “Bullcorn!” You are hard pressed to find somebody in the first section of the Jewish scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – that was in that condition. Multiple wives, yes. People impregnating slaves, yes. People impregnating the widow of their brother, so that the lineage would go on, yes. But I don’t know anybody who wants to live by that standard. And if we don’t live by it, it is an abomination to use that standard on someone else, and I use that word very tactfully. It’s an abomination. It’s an offense before God.

Do you remember the Dr. Laura letter? If you’ve forgotten it or you didn’t see it, Google “Dr. Laura.” You know she went on this campaign against homosexuals...but lovingly. It was very loving when she did it. But somebody sent her a letter for advice:

*“Dr. Laura, I would like to sell my daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?”*

*“Dr. Laura, I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35 clearly states he should be put to death, and I’m morally obligated to kill him myself.”*

*“Dr. Laura, my uncle has a farm. He violates Leviticus 19 by planting two different crops in the same field, (Do you care about the Bible or not?) as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread. He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? As it says in Leviticus 24, couldn’t we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws in Leviticus 20?”*

Now, I realize it’s offensive to talk about this stuff – the examples that we have to do, but that’s a part of the trick here. We discriminate against a group of people for completely fantasized reasons, and then when somebody tries to talk about it, they sound like the pervert. When [someone in] a same sex couple puts a picture of their partner on their desk, and you feel like that’s putting it in your face, they’re not the ones talking about sex. That’s in your mind. When *you* [heterosexuals] put a picture of *your* partner on the desk, you’re not saying to the whole office, “look who I have sex with.” (See, this is my sex partner, right here.) And neither are they. Neither are they. You are the one that projects that image onto their lives, and you’ve got to stop. Time is up, right? It’s time for a new day.

Now, here’s the thing: I wish that Christians realized that we are a part of a new covenant, and it doesn’t include the Levitical codes. You can learn from them, you can address them, but you call no one unclean, and you’re not really a Christian if you do. Here’s the new deal, this is Jesus’ new deal: God is going to absolve you of everything you’ve ever done wrong. You will be forgiven. The slate will be wiped clean under one condition, and that is that you offer that same grace to others. Do not judge and you will not be judged. That is the new covenant, the new testament. We can’t turn it into anything else. Peter had learned that God loves him and forgives him of all his frailties. Now he’s learning that God loves other people the same way. And so, the second half of the deal is not that we do everything perfect or right, but that we let

grace work in our lives and in the world and *we trust it. Trust.* If you wait for people to be lovable before you love them, you will go on waiting forever, because it is love that makes us worthy. I don't remember who said it, but whoever did is smart. *If you wait for people to be lovable before you love them, you will go on waiting forever, because it is love that makes us worthy.*

So, we've had a mild victory, of sorts. We've hit a milestone. But we're not going to live long enough for the church to apologize to Darwin, so we need to do better now. We need to show God's grace now, and the way to do that is to learn the lesson of this story. He [Peter] looks, he sees Cornelius on his knees. He says, "I'm a human being just like you." Then he says to the people that have gathered, "You know it isn't right, it's not lawful for a Jewish person to associate with Gentile people, or visit them. But God has made it clear to me not to call anyone unclean or impure. So Peter said to them, I began to see how true it is that God shows no partiality, rather that any person of any human condition who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God." Would that the church hear these words.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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