

A Sermon Preached by
Fr. Ralph Osborne for the Fifth Sunday after Easter, Year C
May 2, 2010 at St. Thomas Church, Menasha, Wisconsin |
[Acts 11:1-18](#) | [Psalm 148](#) | [Revelation 21:1-6](#) | [John 13:31-35](#)

Some words and phrases bring good thoughts to mind and other words and phrases bring some bad thoughts or memories. Spring is a good word. Warm weather and flowers come to mind when I hear that word. Supper. That's a good word for me. Mosquito. Now that's not a word that brings much cheer. The word discriminate can go two directions. People who have discriminated unfairly have given the word a bad connotation. Yet, it is still an important word that employed well, keeps us safe. For those of you who drink wine, it is good to have a discriminating palate. We make decisions in life and work to discriminate between what is good and bad for us and those around us.

Maybe we soften the word a bit when we use the term discernment. Discernment is an important word in life and in the church. I can tell you that I want my children to be discerning. I want them to pay attention to who they choose as friends. They have to discriminate between good and bad influence. My son Lucas did a good job in discerning a mate. Sarah is a wonderful young lady. When I was a mere child of twenty one, I did the best job possible in discerning a mate for myself. In fact, I was much better at discerning a spouse than Cindy was. I hope her ability to discriminate was not impaired. It is important that the people we care about make well discerned decisions for their lives.

The church needs to discern well too. In fact, when a person expresses a call to ordained ministry, the local church appoints a discernment team. If they decide to move forward, the diocese has a discernment team called the Commission on Ministry. Every step along the way, we try to discern God's will and the strength's and weaknesses of the person seeking ordination. In the local church, we try to discern the gifts our various members have. I hope you are open to discerning your gifts that have been given by God to further the work of the church.

The ability to discriminate is almost universally important. Yet. Our first lesson today stretches us. I had discerned and discriminated that I would not preach about this type of issue until I had been here a while. Yet, here it is in the lesson. The lesson makes us think and work. Most of all, it points us back to God. It has to do with the story a gentile by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius was a man who prayed a lot and helped poor people. One day he had a vision and God spoke to him and told him to send for a man named Peter. God told him that his prayers and his help for the poor had come up to God as a memorial offering before God.

God had a gift for this non-Jewish Gentile man. As far as the church new, the good news of Jesus Christ had not been given to those outside the Jewish faith. Peter needed to bring it to Cornelius, but Peter was not ready. Peter discriminated between Jews and Gentiles. So, God gives Peter a vision. This same vision was connected to a topic of conversation at our double portion lunch a couple of weeks ago. I sat down at table with some gentlemen who were having a heated discussion about the bible. So, the priest got the question. Is it O.K. for a Christian to eat pork. In my sensitive and discriminating way, I think I said, "I love ribs". I can't remember if I told them they had to be cooked properly. "But what about what scripture says?" One man at the table said that was an interpretation. Another said, "I don't interpret scripture, I just read it."

This is probably what Peter said to God when God held down a sheet full of unclean animals and told him to eat. God, you know I don't eat anything unclean! Peter, anything I say is

clean is clean. God repeated it three times. Luke tells the story twice in the book of Acts. It's important.

What happens is this. Peter goes to Cornelius's house and Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit. He gets the same gift that all the other believers get, even though he is a Gentile. So, the church gets mad at Peter. Why do they get mad at him? Because, he ate with THEM. To them, this was against the teaching of scripture. Now we have church conflict. The passage tells us that the church discriminated against Peter. Peter lays out his defense to the church. He told them that God told him to go Cornelius's house without discrimination. With seven witnesses for proof, we have seen that what God has done for us, God has done for the Gentiles.

Are you aware that there is church conflict today too? There was conflict in the beginning of the church, there is conflict in the church today and there will be conflict in the church in the future. If God, or the writers of scripture were embarrassed by that, maybe they wouldn't have included it. They did include it. We can't escape it. Even though St. Thomas is perfect, we don't agree about everything. Sometimes we get hot and we discriminate against each other.

It is a lot of work to discriminate in ways that honor God and honor each other. The brush of discrimination may need to be one of those little paint by number art brushes instead of a four inch exterior house painting brush. It can be a lot of work to listen to the Holy Spirit, especially if the Holy Spirit is doing to us what he did to Peter. "I am telling you to give up a cherished belief to lead you into something new." This is dangerous territory! How can God trust us so much to discern his will and discern whether something new is of God? Yet, God does. Wouldn't it be something if the church was done with racism? Oh yeah, the church got past that decades ago and we no longer discriminate against people of color. We are not done with that. The church hasn't sorted out women's role in the church. The church hasn't sorted out the difficulties surrounding the role of homosexuals in the church. Well, one portion has sorted it out one way and another portion has sorted it another way. Today's reading from the book of Acts is used in the disagreement.

I wish I could give you a nice, tightly wrapped package today. If I could, it might solve the problems of the Episcopal Church. What I do know is that even though we don't deserve it, God is very patient with us. The Holy Spirit still sends us to new places. We still have to discriminate whether it is the Holy Spirit sending us to those new places. Cornelius gives us the answer to the situation we are in. It was the answer back in his day, it is the answer now and it will continue to be the answer. Pray so much and give so much to those in need that God comes to us and says, "your prayers and generosity have come up to God as a memorial offering."