

Have you ever been to a dinner that you just *knew* was going to be uncomfortable? Maybe it was when you were young and a friend invited you to a birthday party filled with people you were sure didn't like you. Or maybe you took pity on that person who kept asking you out and you *finally* just said yes. Or maybe it was your first Thanksgiving with the in-laws. I don't think I need to elaborate on that.

No matter the situation, you just *knew* it would be bad. Your friends and family also questioned you.

"Why are you doing this?" they ask. "You know its going to make you mad."

But you suck it up. You brace yourself for the worst, and go. Because you *just knew* in your heart that it was the right thing to do.

And it's a wonderful dinner. You interact with people you never would have before, and they are kinder, more generous, more *welcoming* than you had ever thought. You begin to establish a community and it changes your perceptions.

That's what happened to Peter when he went to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius, a good man, who gave of his time and money to help those in need, who realized his privilege as an upper-class Roman could be used to better his community, who was also a Gentile and thus

unclean, this Cornelius was granted a vision by God to welcome a stranger into his home with open arms, and set about it straight away. Peter had to face his own prejudices as a Christ-following Jew, one who didn't interact with Gentiles, in order to share a meal with people he *just knew* wouldn't accept him. But God was already at work.

God had set the table. Peter just had to go.

And so Peter went. And it was glorious. Peter's heart was forever changed. He realized that God's love isn't just for the rule-following Jews, oh no, it is for everyone, abundant and prevenient, and all you have to do is listen and go to the table.

I have struggled with this last part. I know that God loves everyone, and so I am called to love everyone, but that doesn't mean that I have to put myself in places where I am uncomfortable, right? Surely God's love won't come from my discomfort.

Before moving to Orlando, I grew up in Avondale, the historic district of downtown Jacksonville. I had only known diversity there. On holidays like Halloween or Luminaria, the entire town would congregate outside their homes mingling and partying on the streets in a huge communal feast. Million dollar homes sat next to dilapidated crack houses, which sat next to a house being remodeled for wheelchair

access, next to which lived a drag queen. On holidays they all partied together.

Then I moved to suburban Orlando, Windermere. The houses here are all the same layout, same styles; everyone in them had to be a part of a homeowners association that made up strange rules like don't park on the street overnight or don't paint your house pepto-bismol pink. And all of the kids parents worked in tourism, and had the latest in cool toys like Webkinz or an iphone and I had Barbie dolls and books and I was *not like them*.

In my mind, all they knew was privilege. They had never grown up around poverty, never heard the words "we don't have the money for that right now," never gone to a school that didn't care about them, where a PTA was almost nonexistent because everyone's parents were overworked.

I was Peter. I believed because they had wealth and privilege and nice things, because they were *different* that I wasn't meant to be with them. So I missed out on the dinners.

Then my family became best friends with another family who was incredibly wealthy. They owned multiple homes, like a beach condo and a house in the mountains. They went to dinners where the appetizers

were \$25 a pop, and then they bought four of them. They took cruises, went on fancy vacations overseas, lived with an excess of money that I just did not understand. They were so different.

Then I got to know them. After months of pulling away, so sure I would just make things bad, I finally sat at the table and listened. And learned.

They will never tell you how much of their time and income they give away. Will never tell you about how they took in a wounded veteran, cut off from his own family, and love him as a son. They will say anything about the price of a meal other than “we got it.” Those \$25 appetizers? They were shared with my family. They treat everyone as equals. They are kind. And generous. And welcoming.

And I was Peter.

How often have you been Peter?

But that is only the first half of the story. Acts 11 goes on to the aftermath, where Peter now has to convince his own community that no, he’s not crazy; yes, this was a good thing; and hey, God’s calling the rest of us to do the same.

Peter is able to convince his peers of the beauty of God's call towards unprecedented inclusion by relating it to their own story of faith.

"They may have a different lifestyle," he says. "But our hearts are the same, called to do God's work through the Holy Spirit and Christ-centered love, and *who am I to limit God?*"

One of the things I love about this church is just how many meals you have. Like most Methodists, community is built around potlucks. After the service, during Bible study, at a quilting group, someone always brings a pasta salad and some Publix fried chicken. But we also have three meals a week that feeds those who are not an active congregant. Sundays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, people from all over the community come to Sanford First to join in a safe environment to share a meal, provide for their families, and connect with others.

How many of you have been to one of our community meals?
What did it feel like?

This congregation is so welcoming, so willing to bring others to a meal, that we feel a lot like Cornelius. "If they would just come in they would see!"

But I have a challenge. What if maybe we are the Peter's of this story. What if God is calling us individually to take a chance, get out of our comfort zones, and go *out*?

There may be people around the community who are Cornelius. Who are so ready to be a part of something greater than themselves. All they are waiting for is a Peter willing to listen to their own call, get up, and join their table.

We are about to partake in our own communal meal, one that Jesus called us to over two thousand years ago. Maybe this is a stepping stone. Maybe you are being called to go where you don't really want to.

God has already set the table. And when God sets the table, no one is barred. Will you join?