

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 15, 2022

Simon the Tanner

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We miss a fairly important detail in our first reading today because it precedes it. In Acts 11 we heard Peter's defense of his actions in the previous chapter. One small detail that Peter leaves off in his recap of that encounter in Joppa is who he was staying with while there. Luke tells us, three times (!) that Peter is staying in the home of Simon the Tanner¹ in Acts 9 and 10. Why on earth would Luke add this extra detail about Peter's host three separate times?

Well, I imagine people around here who have been to Colonial Williamsburg a time or two might have a better sense of what Luke is relating in that detail more than most Americans. While CW doesn't have a tannery you can visit the leather works there and learn about how animal hides are treated, or tanned, before they can be worked into leather clothing. One of the things you will quickly learn is that tanning hides is a very smelly, and rather unpleasant, process, involving a lot of blood, guts, and brains.

Now, the only things we know about this Simon fellow are that he lived in Joppa, he was active enough in the early church that he could have the honor of hosting an apostle, and he was a tanner. That's it. But we can make some assumptions based on those scant details.

The biggest and most important assumption we can make about this Simon is that he was likely viewed as favorably by Jewish culture as the tax collectors were viewed. Being a tanner meant that Simon was hip deep in dead animals and blood for the majority of his day. A reality which would have sent the fastidious Pharisees running for the hills. The Jewish religion at this time was heavily concerned with cleanliness. And being a tanner would have meant that Simon was constantly in danger of being ritualistically unclean.

¹ Acts 9:43, 10:6, 10:32 (NRSV)

His job would have meant that it would have been difficult for Simon to attend worship gatherings at his local synagogue, or even celebrations among his neighbors. I don't want to delve too deeply into the purification code found in Leviticus and Numbers, but if you would like to, check out Leviticus 11 or Numbers 19. To sum the relevant purity codes up, interacting with dead animals that were not killed following kosher rules made one ritualistically unclean for the rest of the day. So in order to interact with his Jewish neighbors, or attend worship, Simon would have had to either not work at all beforehand or take the extra time to follow kosher rules about slaughtering animals (if he slaughtered them himself), thereby losing either income or time.

But it wasn't just being potentially ritualistically unclean that would have been the problem. Rabbinical writings in the Talmud indicate that tanners were generally considered to be smelly, unclean, **and immoral too**. Isaac Oliver points this out in his article, *Simon Peter Meets Simon the Tanner*. "Thus, a baraita [teaching] cited in *b. Qidd. 82a* [a teaching from the Babylonian Talmud] forbids tanners from becoming a high priest or a king. But tanners are not the only workers singled out in this passage. Several other professionals do not qualify, including goldsmiths, carders, handmill cleaners, peddlers, wooldressers, barbers, launderers, and bath attendants. In this same baraita, the rabbis place all of these professions under one common denominator: any man who engages in any of these trades supposedly possesses an immoral character because of his extensive interaction with women during work hours. Hence, the rabbis explicitly state that such people are exempt from serving as a high priest or king not because they are unfit (דפסילי משום לא), but because their vocations are demeaning, literally 'worthless' (זילי)." ² [brackets mine]

It's interesting to me how societies generally transfer their view of certain occupations to the people who work in them. I find myself frequently annoyed at the conversations I sometimes hear about how some labor should be considered "less than" other labor. Such views today are generally attributed to service industry jobs, and the people who work in them. Our society generally looks down on servers, janitors, garbage collectors, and the like. Much the way Peter would have been taught to look down on tax collectors and tanners...until he encountered Jesus Christ.

² Oliver, I. W. (2012). Simon Peter meets simon the tanner: The ritual insignificance of tanning in ancient Judaism. *New Testament Studies*, 59(1), 50–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0028688512000173>

But clearly at this point in his growth Peter has only taken a half-step towards the radical inclusivity that Christ taught. He's willing to be hosted by someone of a "bad" or "lesser" occupation. Which shows he's gotten over **some** of his nonsensical bigotry, but there are still some vestiges of prejudice at work in his heart. And so we have the Spirit speaking to the gentile Cornelius and sending Peter a vision. A vision quite radical in its message.

Remember my brief reference to Leviticus and Numbers? Those chapters I pointed you towards also list all sorts of animals that are simply unacceptable. And, of course, the Israelites being human, extrapolated that instruction to mean that since those animals are considered unclean, then any person or group of people who raised or consumed them were unclean as well. What a great way to dehumanize others! And look! Two thousand years later and humanity is still steeped in this anti-Christ and anti-human attitude.

It's like we go out of our way to dehumanize others. We hear the command of Christ to love one another and then do everything possible to encourage hate and violence instead. It's enough to make one despair. Where is the Spirit's vision sent to those who are so full of hatred towards their neighbors today? Where is the call to love prodigally being voiced in our society? Where is the radical grace, love, and inclusivity that Christ preached to be found today?

Well, I hope it's here, right here at St. Stephen. I hope we can get out of the Spirit's way enough to proclaim to the world around us that the divisions and dehumanizing must end. The best time for taking action on being radically loving and inclusive was long ago, but the next best time is now. So let's be bringers of God's vision! Let's call out the anti-Christ and anti-human messages which tell us to divide ourselves and look down on one another the way Peter was called out by the Spirit and the way he would go on to call out the church in Jerusalem. Let's be people of radical love and inclusion the way Christ loved and included others, even the oppressed and marginalized. Let's be Peter...let's be better than Peter!

This is urgent too. Look at the world around us. There are so many divisions. So many calls to dehumanize others who are different than us. Transgender bans, "don't say gay" bills, rising antisemitism and islamophobia. All these things targeted at those considered "other" or unclean. All these are anti-Christ and anti-Gospel. And it is our responsibility to stand up against this rising tide of hatred and dehumanization and oppose it. We are called to be people of radical love. That's how we show forth our faith. That's the surest way to walk the Way of Christ. After all, "By this everyone will know that you

are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”³ So go and love...even the smelly, unclean tanner. Go and love your transgender or gay neighbor. Just go and love. Amen.

³ John 13:35