

“GAME CHANGER”

Pastor Mike Corwin

TEXT: ACTS 11:1-18

GOD’S WORD: REVELATION 21:1-6

I – REVELATION:

The scripture from Revelation we read just a few minutes ago is a wonderful promise of what’s to come. Up until this chapter the writing of John concerning his vision from God has been about destruction. 20 Chapters of death and destruction concerning the end of the world as we know it. Then in Chapter 21 and 22 he finishes his writing by telling us of the glorious result of God’s work to restore creation.

In these short verses we get a vision of the promise of a new creation...a new heaven...a new earth without any problems. Our thirst for Salvation will be quenched! Justice will prevail. There is an end goal in sight. I wonder why we only usually hear this passage read at funerals. That gives us a perception that this promise is only for funerals and disasters. I think its limited use limits our vision of God dwelling in our midst right now in the present. This passage lets us know that God is working even today and helps us look forward to life altering hope. Hope we can have even in the midst of death and destruction...turmoil and struggle.

This is a picture of our Salvation. Living with God in heaven in perfection for all of eternity. Mankind’s story started in a garden that we broke, but will end in a Holy City forever in the presence of God.

II – FOR WHO?:

But then my mind starts to work and ask questions. The first question I would have for John in response to his book is, “Who gets to live in this Holy City?” You were born and raised a good Jewish person. You studied and were raised with the teachings of your faith. Jesus himself was a good Jew. Read from the scrolls, knew the rules and commandments. Knew that his heavenly father had called the Hebrew people to be his chosen ones, his pride and joy. So is this promise for them only?

And then we get to the religions of today. We have taken the faith of Jesus and split it into fractions called “denominations.” There are some of those denominations that believe they are the only ones going to heaven and the rest of us are doomed. The leader of one of those denominations said his was the only true religion and the rest of us are just playing church. Another preaches that only 144,000 people will make it to heaven where they will rule over the rest of us still here on earth. Yet another believes that if you don’t belong to their denomination and are baptized into it you will not reach heaven since they evidently know all the secrets the rest of us have never been told.

And I have to tell you this isn't something in another state or a distant land. It's right here in Bucyrus, Ohio. As I've worked on various projects in town I have called other pastors to see if they would like to be involved. Most made various excuses, but I actually had one tell me that if we didn't go to their church and worship as they did they would not be a part of anything we did. I remember being criticized on the social media, in newspaper ads, and on billboards when we used to do "FairJam" because we were using modern Christian music. I used to belong to a ministerial association as I tried to work with other denominations to proclaim the Gospel and build the Kingdom. I resigned last year after a lively discussion about sexuality which deteriorated into a statement that not only were such people not invited to the Kingdom, but neither would be Jews, or Muslims, or anyone who thought different than them. I keep waiting for the crusades to begin again as religious knight's ride down the streets of Bucyrus in their white robes emblazoned with red crosses chopping off heads!

What do you suppose the chances are of converting people to Christianity if you project this kind of bigotry in the Church of Jesus?

III – TEXT:

I wish I could tell you that the 1st century church was one big happy family. That after spending three years in the presence of its founder, Jesus Christ, they had no problems with prejudice or bigotry. I wish I could tell you that but I'd be lying. It had the same issues. The biggest was between the Jewish Faith and the new founded Christian Faith. The Jews still looked at the new faith as a bunch of blasphemous traitors. Even the Jews who had converted still held on to old traditions like salvation could not be obtained without circumcision and eating according to the Jewish laws. Then there were the hated heathen Gentiles who were looked down on and avoided by both.

That all changed with the conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. I spoke about the 2nd part of that story a couple weeks ago. Today I want to look at the first part of the story too. This even is a landmark in the history of the Gospel's advance from being strictly Jewish to the penetration of the Roman Empire. It revealed that God was not confined to traditional forms of Judaism but would come to the Gentiles too. This would all happen through Jesus...THE GAME CHANGER.

Acts 11:1-18 (NLT)

¹ Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. ² But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. ³ "You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said. ⁴ Then Peter told them exactly what had happened. ⁵ "I was in the town of Joppa," he said, "and while I was praying, I went into a trance and saw a vision. Something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners from the sky. And it came right down to me. ⁶ When I looked inside the sheet, I saw all sorts of tame and wild animals, reptiles, and birds. ⁷ And I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.' ⁸ "No, Lord," I replied. 'I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure or unclean.' ⁹ "But the voice from

heaven spoke again: 'Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.' ¹⁰This happened three times before the sheet and all it contained was pulled back up to heaven. ¹¹"Just then three men who had been sent from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. ¹²The Holy Spirit told me to go with them and not to worry that they were Gentiles. These six brothers here accompanied me, and we soon entered the home of the man who had sent for us. ¹³He told us how an angel had appeared to him in his home and had told him, 'Send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. ¹⁴He will tell you how you and everyone in your household can be saved!' ¹⁵"As I began to speak," Peter continued, "the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as he fell on us at the beginning. ¹⁶Then I thought of the Lord's words when he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?" ¹⁸When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, "We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life."

The news that Peter, the leader of the Apostles, the leader of the Church, had preached the Word of God to the Gentiles was earth shattering and it traveled through the church fast. They were waiting for him to get back to the office so they could begin telling him the error of his ways. How dare he preach the secret Words to them but he ate with them and baptized them too! You broke the Rules! You changed tradition! Surely this would rip the church apart! This would be worse than arguing over the color of the dirt in the catacomb nursery.

Peter didn't go into defense mode. He didn't try to justify his actions. He just told them the story of what had happened. A story that showed what had happened was the divine initiative of God and his inability to withstand God and his grace. It was God who gave him the vision. It was the Holy Spirit that was active and present and sent him to the Gentiles.

When the others had heard the story his critics shut up and credited God (not Peter) with what had transpired. They realized the same thing Peter had...this was God's plan to save the world through Jesus. Jesus came to be a game changer in the relationship between God and his people.

IV – TODAY'S CHURCH:

As I look at this passage and see what was happening I can't help but see that today's church has some of the same characteristics and needs to see some of the lessons learned by Peter and the others.

We still have our parking lot meetings, we still gossip, and we still allow things to interfere with the workings of God even when we don't have all the facts at our disposal. Peter points out the question of who are we to judge what is acceptable or unacceptable in God's world. As one translation puts

it..."what God has made clean, you must not call profane." And yet we spend a lifetime doing it. We judge or are biased on things like:

- Gender
- Age
- Skin color
- Money
- Living location
- Denomination
- Political Party
- Appearance (tattoos – etc.)
- And the latest / greatest sexuality

Lines are drawn, sides are chosen, and minds are made up. That's the way it is.

And yet in Jesus I see a changed game. Isn't it ironic that what started out as a Jewish religion against the Gentiles is now a Gentile religion against the Jews and everybody else? In Jesus I see a model who was non-judgmental and wanted everyone to meet God. I see a model who preached a radical way of life in the Sermon on the Mount. A model who ate with sinners, who touched lepers, who let his feet be washed with the tears of a prostitute, who talked to tax collectors, adulteresses, and half breed women married 5 times. A model who helped slaves and children. A model who upset tradition by taking a criminal to heaven who wasn't part of the church and had never been baptized. I see a God who has no lines that shouldn't be crossed to preach the Gospel and bring people into the Kingdom of God no matter who they were or what they had done.

V – OUR CHURCH:

On the front of our bulletin is a statement of who is welcome here. I have to tell you a lot of thought went in to this statement, a lot of revisions before it said what we wanted to say the way we wanted to say it. I believe it, I try to live it, and as your pastor I call you to do the same.

This statement asks the same question Peter asked at the end of his story to the panel in Jerusalem... "Who am I to stand in God's way?" That's the question I ask all of you this day. Who are you to stand in God's way? Who are you to call anything God has made clean profane?

The Church of Jesus Christ is supposed to tear down the religious barriers – not erect them. We need no horse's swords or shields with bright red crosses. We need only the blood red wood of the cross where Jesus died to save all of Creation and everyone in it. That's our story. That's the game changer.

AMEN