

God is Selfish
Psalm 148
Acts 11:1-18

Isn't it awesome that God is selfish? After all, God is so selfish that God wants everyone to be forgiven, loved, and part of God's family! God not only wanted to create everything, but God also wants to keep everything. But God's selfishness does not mean that God will hang on to us and not let us go. Rather God wants us to be part of God's family because we want to be, not because we have to be. That is how much God loves us!

In today's lesson in Acts, we read about how God wants more than just the Israelites to be His people. God wants the Gentiles to be His people too! Although God freely chose the children of Abraham to be His people, he never intended the door to be closed behind them. As the years turned into decades and centuries, Jewish laws were developed to protect the Israelites from turning away from God. But what was meant as a means to keep Israelites as children of God also worked to exclude others. It became a club of those who were in and those who were out. Some foods were clean, others were not. Some rituals were clean, others were not. Those who were healthy were clean; those who were ill or crippled were unclean. Jews were clean, Gentiles were unclean. It was the division of us and them, and God was only on the us side, right? Well not exactly. You see, while God loved the children of Abraham and had chosen them for His special covenant; God did not plan to stop His love by caring only for them. God's plan was to rule the world and win the hearts of all of creation.

Simon Peter, a devout Jew and disciple of Jesus Christ, found out God's selfish plan in a series of visions that he had one night when he had planned to exclude others from God's love in Jesus Christ. Peter, like most devout Jews, thought that God only wanted to be in relationship with His chosen people. Although anyone could become a Jew, it was not a simple task, it required complete change in habit, dress, diet, and action. Peter assumed that anyone wanting to follow Jesus would also have to become a Jew, as if Christianity would be a subdivision of Judaism. But what Peter soon found out was that Jews were not the only ones God loved! God also loved Gentiles and wanted all people to be His people.

Apparently the time was right for God to reveal His plan to Peter, so amid the discussion of who is in and who is out, Peter was led by God to a new understanding. Peter's new way of understanding began with a vision. He was in prayer when a trance fell over him. He then saw a vision of a large sheet like thing coming down from heaven. In it were all the animals that devout Jews were not supposed to kill and eat. But a voice from heaven told Peter to get up, kill, and eat. Defending himself, Peter told the Lord that he would not eat anything that was unclean or profane; he never had and he never would. But then God said to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Three times this vision repeated itself and then everything went back up to heaven and Peter came out of the trance. Right after that three men came to Peter to learn about salvation. These men were not Jews, but the Spirit told Peter not to make a distinction between us and them, so Peter went with them, told them all about the salvation of Jesus, and they too became believers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

But we also find out that Peter was not the only one who needed convincing of God's plan. His fellow disciples criticized Peter for mingling with unclean persons, so Peter then had to explain to them his testimony of the vision and his experience.

All too often, we find ourselves gravitating toward those who are like us. Without conscious effort, we form groups of us and them; making a distinction that we are somehow better than them. But if we were to see the world through God's eyes, we would have to level the playing field. Every person is a child of God, whether or not he or she chooses to recognize it. By crossing the boundary of us and them, we not only recognize God's love extending beyond boundaries, but we demonstrate to others that we are working toward reconciliation rather than division and oppression.

It is our responsibility as disciples of Christ, to cross boundaries and extend the love of Jesus to others. God selfishly wants everyone to Himself, but when we keep God to ourselves we are being selfish. But our selfishness is not the same as God's because only God can be selfish in a positive way, especially since God gave his very own life in Jesus for each and every one of us.

Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962), the world-famous violinist, earned a fortune with his concerts and compositions, but he generously gave most of it away. So, when he discovered an exquisite violin on one of his trips, he wasn't able to buy it. Later, having raised enough money to meet the asking price, he returned to the seller, hoping to purchase that beautiful instrument. But to his great dismay it had been sold to a collector. Kreisler made his way to the new owner's home and offered to buy the violin. The collector said it had become his prized possession and he would not sell it. Keenly disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave when he had an idea. "Could I play the instrument once more before it is consigned to silence?" he asked. Permission was granted, and the great virtuoso filled the room with such heart-moving music that the collector's emotions were deeply stirred. "I have no right to keep that to myself," he exclaimed. "It's yours, Mr. Kreisler. Take it into the world, and let people hear it."¹

The gift we have in Jesus is meant to be shared. The Good News of Jesus Christ is not for us alone, but also for them. It is for the lonely and grouchy old man on the street corner; it is for the young mother struggling with her addiction to meth; it is for the troubled teen who robbed a convenient store and is now paying the price; it is for the drunk who is drowning out memories of his experiences in Vietnam; it is for your estranged family member. It is for all people, near and far, like us and different than us. It is for all people because that is how much God loves us! God loves us so much that God longs to bring us close, grant us forgiveness and mercy, and show us how to be His children, loved and filled with grace.

¹ *Our Daily Bread*, February 4, 1994. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/evangelism.htm> (accessed April 29, 2010)

So the next time we are tempted to distinguish between us and them, let us remember that God is a selfish God and wants nothing less than to demonstrate God's love through Jesus Christ to all people. Amen.

Prayer:

Life-giving Lord,
Forgive our selfishness in wanting to keep your goodness to ourselves. Help us to look beyond the boundaries we create to see that those we deem as others are just as important to you as we are. Help us, gracious God, to not distinguish between us and them so that we might demonstrate your generous love to others. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.