

What God Has Made Clean, We Must not Call Profane: Let's Not Get Too Comfortable with the Familiar

By Dr. Tim Lee

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Preface

I delivered the following sermon on August 10, 2006, to an audience gathered at University Christian Church of Berkeley for the opening worship of a North American Pacific/Asian Disciples convocation. Many in the audience were leaders of our church – congregational, regional, and general – and even more were immigrants, mostly from Asia and Pacific Islands – Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Mongolians, Samoans, and Vietnamese. In the sermon, immigration (or a particular experience of it) is discussed not as the main subject but as an illustration, an illustration that underscores that even procedurally correct laws can be immoral and unchristian – can indiscriminately demean and hurt people – if they fail to recognize the essential humanity of those they are directed against. Lest we forget, an immigrant, documented or undocumented, is a human being, created by God, in the image of God.

—Tim Lee

Text: Acts 10: 9-16

Today's text is an excerpt from that famous narrative about how the Apostle Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius came to meet each other. Cornelius is not a Jew, yet he is a devout believer of God. One day, he has a vision in which an angel tells him that his devotion has so impressed God that God wants to do something for him, and tells him to send messengers to Peter to have him come over to Cornelius's house. While the messengers are on their way, Peter also experiences a vision – a strange one in which he sees cows, hogs, lizards, and a bunch of other animals thrown together in a huge sheet that moves up and down in the air three times, with a voice telling him he should eat all those animals, with Peter himself protesting he would never eat anything as profane as a lizard, and finally with the voice saying: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (v. 15)

Even as Peter is trying to puzzle out this vision, he is led by the Spirit to meet Cornelius's messengers, who direct him to their master's house. "On Peter's arrival," scripture tells us, "Cornelius . . . falling at his feet, worshiped him...." causing an alarmed Peter to say, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." Peter went on to say, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." (v. 28) Thereafter, Peter preached about Jesus Christ, in the course of which "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word," (v. 44) and baptized Cornelius and his household in the name of Jesus Christ.

Let's think about Peter's vision a little bit. The crucial part, I think, is where God tells Peter to eat the animals and he protests. Peter protests because he thinks of himself as a devout Jew – and devout Jews didn't eat just any animal! Chickens and cows, yes; but hogs and lizards? – no way! Only those animals allowed by the dietary law would he eat. Peter was puzzled because he didn't get the symbolism of it all. What did those hogs and lizards stand for? Why

would God want him to break a familiar routine that he thought was so important? But by the time he arrived at Cornelius's house, he had everything figured out. The animals stood for people of different races, nations, ethnicities, and other kinds of groupings; Peter's eating of them symbolized his fellowshipping with them. In other words, eating exotic animals like lizards meant fellowshipping with exotic people like...well...Koreans!...or how about Anglo-Italian-Polish-Swedish Americans!

My dictionary defines exotic as "intriguingly unusual or different." Normally, we are conservative about dealing with things different or unfamiliar – unfamiliar food, stocks, people. To an extent, such a disposition is reasonable because it enhances our chances of survival. But problems occur when we get too comfortable with the familiar, to the extent we lose the awareness that there are other ways of doing basically the same thing that are just as valid as ours. White bread and burrito may be natural food to folk in Ft. Worth, Texas, where I currently live, but rice and kimchee are more natural to folk in Korea Town, Los Angeles. But, in the end, they both accomplish basically the same thing, feeding the hungry stomach. When we lose the awareness that there are diverse ways of doing basically the same thing, we run the risk of falling into the us-versus-them kind of thinking where what is comfortable and familiar to us is transmuted into something natural and eternally true – while what is different to us is transmuted into something abnormal and essentially inferior. We, in short, run the risk of calling people or things profane even when they come clean off God's hands.

More specifically, when we become overly comfortable with the familiar, we tend to make two kinds of blunders. One is that we are likely to lump together everyone and everything that is different from us under one catchall category called the "other." This otherizing tendency – an extreme example of which is to call people who are different from us an "evil empire" or "axis of evil" – may bring some simplistic order to our own minds but hinders our ability to truly understand other people or to appreciate the fact that they themselves may be very diverse. This blunder hinders us from entertaining the notion that each of these individuals and peoples might have a unique history, a special culture, and unanticipated gifts.

One of my favorite Disciples is Joe Nagano, a cheerful Japanese-American who lives in Los Angeles. He once told me this joke. It's such a good joke that I want you to hear it too. He said he had heard it from a rabbi, so it has to be kosher. Bear with me.

A Korean man was riding in a New York subway train. At a station stop, he was joined by a Jewish man. As the train was in transit, the Jew, for some reason, kept eyeballing the Korean; he then walked up to the guy and socked him in the face, shouting, "That's for Pearl Harbor, you Jap!" Bewildered, the Korean looked up and protested, "But I am a Korean." To which the Jew replied, "Ah, what's the difference: Koreans, Japanese, Chinese – they're all the same!" When the Jew returned to his seat, the Korean regained his composure and now he began eyeballing the Jew. Before long, he too got up, walked up to the Jew, and socked him in the face, saying, "That's for Titanic!" The Jew got befuddled and protested, "Titanic . . . what does that have to do with me!" The Korean retorted, "Ah, what's the difference: Goldberg, Spielberg, iceberg – they are all the same!"

You are right to laugh – this is a very funny joke. But once we've finished laughing, it would pay to reflect on it a little bit. Would we be laughing if we were at the receiving end of a punch? Would we be laughing if we were one of those 120,000 Americans who during the Second World War were forced to suffer internment simply because they were of an unfamiliar ancestry – in this case Japanese? One of those "unfamiliar" people was David Kagiwada, whom we know so well as a founder of the North American Pacific/Asian Disciples (NAPAD). I could

easily imagine a bewildered David protesting when he was told by soldiers to pack up his belongings and head for the camp, “but we are Japanese-Americans,” only to be told, “Ah, what’s the difference!” We wouldn’t be laughing if we were Sikhs and just because we wore a turban, we got lumped up with Osama Bin Laden and found ourselves literally at the receiving end of a punch. In my flight here from Fort Worth, I read an article in *USA Today* about how a lot of Muslim Americans have been suffering psychological problems since September 11, 2001, because of anti-Muslim prejudices. There was one particular case of an American-born Muslim man who received an e-mail from his co-worker that began “Dear Terrorist.” Imagine getting an e-mail like that!

The second blunder we make when we become too comfortable with the familiar is really the flip side of the first blunder. In the first blunder we lump together all those people and things that are different from us and demean them. In the second blunder, we make ourselves, or that which is familiar to us, the norm of what is good and beautiful – and usually end up looking quite bad and ugly. Take for example, skin color. There is no getting around the fact that our skin color – our physical appearance – is familiar to us. That in itself is not a problem. The problem occurs when we get too comfortable with our skin color – our own family, our own culture, our own gender, our own sexual orientation – to the extent that we make it normative for all humanity. We know this problem all too well, and it comes with different labels: racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and homophobia. But whatever we call it, we know it is wrong, because it forces us to call profane what God has made clean.

We are well aware of racism’s harmful effects – how it poisons everything it touches. I already alluded to the harmful effects it had on Japanese-American Disciples. There is another NAPAD group that was equally hurt by racism – the Chinese-American Disciples – and theirs is a story that has rarely been told.

A large majority of Disciples are Euro-Americans, and most of our white brothers and sisters know very little about Asians in their midst. Those who do know something about us tend to think we are some kind of Johnny-come-latelies, brought in by the latest 747s that landed at LAX airport. The truth of the matter is that Asians have been part of the Disciples for over a hundred years – at least since 1897 when the Christian Women’s Board of Missions (CWBM) helped to found a Disciples community among the Chinese in Portland, Oregon. This community grew to be a full-blown church holding weekly worship, Sunday schools, and night classes. They were led by Chinese themselves, lay and ordained. Two of the leaders were graduates of Drake College, which was a Disciples institution back then. In 1907, CWBM established another Chinese “mission” in San Francisco, called the Chinese Christian Institute. There Chinese Christians, with the help of the missionary society, conducted church services, Bible schools, and night classes teaching English. They also ran day school for Chinese children, held classes on music and home economics, as well as house-to-house work programs for girls and women.

These two communities were never very large. Neither church’s adult membership seems to have gone beyond one hundred, although Sunday school enrollment at the Chinese Christian Institute usually numbered around one hundred fifty. Nonetheless what is important is that these two churches served vital needs of their respective communities. Also the memberships were small not for want of evangelistic zeal on the part of the Chinese. The main problem was a racism that was rampant against Chinese – that shut off Chinese immigration and harried many Chinese who were already in the country out of it.

You may be aware that Chinese were encouraged to immigrate to the United States till about the 1870s, mainly because the country needed their cheap labor, especially to build the transcontinental railroad. In 1868, Congress even passed a treaty (Burlington Treaty) that guaranteed Chinese immigration. But after the railroad was completed (1869), Chinese were seen as competitors by white laborers and subjected to lynching and discriminatory laws. Beginning in 1880 a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts were passed, including an act passed in 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) that made it virtually impossible for Chinese and other Asians to immigrate to the United States. Speaking in support of this act, Senator Ellison DuRant Smith of South Carolina made the following remark that illustrates what I mean by the danger of becoming too comfortable with the familiar. He said:

Thank God we have in America perhaps the largest percentage of any country in the world of the pure, unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock; certainly the greatest of any nation in the Nordic breed. It is for the preservation of that splendid stock that has characterized us that I would make this not an asylum for the oppressed of all countries, but a country to assimilate and perfect that splendid type of manhood that has made America the foremost Nation in her progress and in her power, and yet the youngest of all the nation. . . . without offense, but with regard to the salvation of our own, let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own American resources. (Speech by Ellison DuRant Smith, April 9, 1924, Congressional Record, 68th)

With racist rhetoric like this prevailing even in halls of Congress, you may not be surprised to learn that in the same year that this act was passed – 1924 – the Chinese Disciples church in Portland (and most likely San Francisco’s Chinese Christian Institute) was shut down. Was it a mere coincidence? I have my doubts. Be that as it may, what is certain is that after the closure of those churches in Portland and San Francisco, Disciples would not have another Chinese church for a long time – not until 1990 when First Chinese Christian Church (DOC) was founded in Alhambra, California. What God has made clean, we must not call profane!

Though the closure of the Chinese churches was deplorable, the picture wasn’t entirely bleak even back then. Not long after the Chinese churches were closed, another Asian community – Filipinos – came to the attention of some Anglo Disciples. In 1933, these Anglos and Filipinos worked together to establish **Filipino** Christian Church (DOC) in Los Angeles. A few years ago I had the privilege to briefly serve this church as interim pulpit minister and in the process learned some of its history. What I learned was extremely encouraging. From the outset, the Anglos did not seek to make the church in their image but helped it become a Filipino Christian Church. And what a marvelous job they and the Filipinos have done! In its seventy plus years of history, Filipino Christian Church has ministered not only to spiritual needs of Filipino Christians but also social needs of thousands of Filipino immigrants in Los Angeles. The church had become such an important part of the Filipino community that in 1998 the City of Los Angeles declared its buildings a historical-cultural monument. On top of all that, the church has produced some of the most loyal Disciples you will find anywhere, such as the late Royal Morales, a fiery civil rights leader, and Patricia (Cisa) Payuyo, who served as the First Vice Moderator of the General Assembly in the past two years. What God has made clean, we must not call profane!

When I was in seminary I had to take a preaching class, and in that class my classmates and I took turns preaching to the class. One day, it was Steve’s turn. Steve was a preacher’s kid and must have been in his late twenties. He was a veteran, a veteran of the Gulf War – the first Iraq War – which, as you know, took place in 1991. He preached about an experience he had in that war. Steve was captain in some kind of special unit, and one day he and his men were sent to

take an enemy territory. When he arrived there, however, he found that the battle had already been fought and won – by the Air Force. Iraqi debris was everywhere – bombed out tanks, some of them still smoldering, and dead bodies, broken and strewn all over. Among the debris were some Iraqi soldiers that had been spared – all dazed and traumatized, waiting to be captured. As Steve and his men rounded them up, one of them approached him and asked for permission to do something. He asked that he be allowed to pray – pray for his friends who had perished in the bombing. A strange request, Steve thought, but like a good preacher's kid, he granted the wish. The man then unfurled a prayer mat on the sand, and for the next thirty minutes, in the midst of the horrific ruins, he gave the most heartfelt prayer Steve had ever heard – beseeching Allah, calling forth the names of his slain friends. Witnessing this prayer, Steve said he was deeply moved. He felt he was in the presence of God, and felt a profound bond between him and the man who was supposed to have been his enemy, who was supposed to have been so profane. Just as St. Peter, in the presence of God, was able to see an essential commonness between him and the Roman centurion who was supposed to have been profane, Steve, in the presence of God, was able to see a similarity between him and the Iraqi soldier, and this similarity dwarfed whatever difference that may have existed between them.

Seeking similarities between us and those who are different from us, seeing the clean hand of God in all that God has created, even if that means experiencing discomfort, is one of the things we are called to do as Christians. And only if we can do that, will it be possible for us to reconcile in Christ. What God has made clean, we must never call profane!