CONVERSATION STARTER

If you could travel to any place in the world for a week, with money as no barrier, where would you go and why?

GOD DECLARES ALL PEOPLE CLEAN

Prejudice isn't a new phenomenon. It existed in the ancient world just as it does today. For the early followers of Jesus, Jews, by tradition and custom, kept themselves separated from their non-Jewish counterparts. But all of that begins to change as the Church spreads during the story of Acts.

It begins with a vision. Peter sees Heaven opened and a large sheet with a multitude of different animals on it. God then tells Peter to kill and eat. This comes as quite a shock to Peter because some of these animals are not considered clean by Jewish kosher standards, meaning God told His people previously *not* to eat them. It's understandable why Peter reacts strongly, saying, "Surely not, Lord!" But God responds, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean," and this cycle repeats itself three times.

While at first, it may seem like God is simply breaking down the barriers for what Jewish men and women are able to consume, the truth is much more profound. Peter himself will confess as he describes this vision to a group of Gentiles, saying, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." In other words, the vision is not about food; it's about people. God is breaking down the walls that keep His people apart. He's tearing down the barriers that separate Jew and Gentile, helping them to see that both are welcome in the new Kingdom God is creating.

Spend a few minutes discussing with your group. What groups of people do we tend to build walls around today? How might the Church be called to break down the walls that keep God's people apart and promote reconciliation in the name of Jesus?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. Much of what happens in these stories is a direct result of visions and angels leading the disciples where God wants them to go. What guides your actions and decisions day-to-day? What does it look like for you to invite God to guide your steps?
3. Antioch was a major urban center, the third largest in Rome. Picture San Francisco, Chicago, or Atlanta. Though we often think of big secular cities as being hostile to faith, often, these are where the church takes root. What is it about large urban areas that create fertile soil for the gospel to grow in?
4. The church at Antioch responds with generosity toward its neighbor when famine breaks out in the region. How can you be open to the cries of those who are hurting and in need around you this week?
5. As the work of God continued to spread, the early followers of Jesus faced opposition in many forms. Where do you see opposition coming against the Gospel message today? How do you think the Church ought to respond in the face of these challenges?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Our readings this week lead us to the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas. We also get a snapshot of a community willing to put the needs of others above their own when famine hits. Together, these snapshots paint a picture of a church that is deeply concerned with the welfare of its neighbors. From the very beginning of Church history, care for the widow, orphan, poor, and marginalized is a key tenet of how we live out our faith in Christ.

How often do you take part in opportunities to serve or care for your neighbors? As a church, we have dozens of programs, ministries, and initiatives designed to lift people out of poverty and bring hope and healing to our community. Take time this week to think about how you could join these efforts. Look at our [Outreach Ministries](), and consider where you might be able to serve or give generously. Consider serving with [Carpenters for Christ]() or through one of our other local partnerships. No matter what you choose, don't let this week pass without making a commitment to serve somewhere!