

“Even on the Gentiles”

Acts 10:44-48

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Some of the comments and conversations after my sermon last week made me realize that the story about how the Gospel reached Ethiopia was less familiar to people than I thought it was. Sometimes my assumptions turn out to be incorrect. That sort of thing happens to all of us from time to time, when we listen to other people, when we are open to the ongoing movement of the Holy Spirit.

The story from Acts this week falls along those same lines; basically, this is a story about some early Christians who were just *wrong* about some things. There were things they needed to learn; things that *surprised* them. The Holy Spirit was moving in ways that they had not anticipated.

Now you only heard a small snippet of this story. It’s a lengthy story; it starts at the beginning of Acts 10 and continues into chapter 11; 66 verses in all. You only heard five of those verses, near the end. To understand what’s going on, we need to go back to the beginning, and watch the events unfold.

At the beginning of Acts 10 we are introduced to a man named Cornelius. He’s a centurion, a commanding officer in the Roman army. We are told that he was “a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” He was one of quite a number of people in the Roman Empire who were attracted to the Jewish faith; he found more meaning and depth in Jewish practices and the Jewish understanding of God than he did in the worship of the traditional Greco-Roman deities. But, because he was a Gentile, he could never truly become Jewish. He would always be an outsider looking in. And because of the long-standing political tensions between the Jews and the Romans, he knew that no Jew would ever really trust him.

Cornelius was stationed in the city of Caesarea. That was a large Roman city along Israel’s coast. It had been built by Herod the Great, who named it for Caesar Augustus; it was a bustling harbor town, with two large breakwaters extending out into the Mediterranean Sea. Ships came and went to Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and to many other places in the Roman Empire. There were temples, a theater, a hippodrome (for horse and chariot racing), massive palaces, government buildings, marketplaces, bath houses – all the things typical of large Roman cities. It was not a place where a Jew would feel welcome.

Cornelius has a vision. An angel appears to him, telling him to send some of his men to the town of Joppa. That was another port city, about 35 miles to the south along the Mediterranean shoreline, older but not as impressive as Caesarea. The angel tells Cornelius to have his men look for a man in Joppa named Simon, “who is called Peter,” and that this man could be found lodging with another man named Simon, a tanner by trade, “whose house is by the seaside.” Cornelius dutifully obeyed the angel.

That Simon was, of course, the apostle Peter. Peter was in Joppa because he was building up

the fledgling community of Christians there. This was probably somewhere around the year 40 AD, about ten years after Christ's death and resurrection. While the men sent by Cornelius were on their way to Joppa, Peter also has a vision. He sees a large sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals that the Jews considered "unclean;" they were forbidden from eating them. Peter hears a voice telling him to kill, cook, and eat these animals. He is horrified; he says, "I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter, dumbfounded by what he is hearing, experiences this vision no less than three times.

Right at that moment, the men from Cornelius arrive at the house. They are standing outside, knocking on the gate, calling for Peter. Peter hears the voice again: "Three men are searching for you. Get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." Peter goes to the door and asks the Romans why they have come. They explain: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." I don't know what Peter was expecting to hear, but it probably wasn't *that!* So Peter and a half-dozen believers from Joppa head up to Caesarea.

When Peter arrives at Cornelius's house, Cornelius gets down on his knees and starts worshiping Peter. Peter has to tell him, "I'm just a man." Peter looks around the room. There are many people present: some of Cornelius's men; members of Cornelius's family; some of Cornelius's friends. All Romans, all Gentiles. All considered "unclean" by traditional Jewish standards. All of them are staring at Peter, who says, "You know that it's against the Jewish Law for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anything profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" So Cornelius tells his story. The vision. The angel. The instructions he received. Peter listens, fascinated. Cornelius concludes: "So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Imagine. A Roman centurion. In his Roman house. Surrounded by his Roman friends, family, and subordinates. In a Roman city. Into this house comes a Jewish fisherman and six of his friends. The Roman bows down to the Jew. He and his companions all wait with baited breath to listen to whatever this Jewish fisherman has to say. This is *not* how things ordinarily happened in Roman-occupied Palestine! The Romans were the oppressors. They were the ones who exacted heavy taxes. They were the ones who disrespected Jewish faith and practice. They were the ones whom some Jews wanted to fight. Paul says there was a "dividing wall of hostility" between Jews and Gentiles. (Ephesians 2:14) And here is this peaceful gathering, two *vastly* different groups of people, listening to one another.

Peter is astonished. He is realizing that his view of the world was extremely limited. Biased. Narrow-minded. Short-sighted. He says: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." That was an epiphany for Peter. Some interpreters say that it's not *Cornelius* who is converted in this story, it's *Peter*, as he realizes just how profoundly wrong he had been. He had been brought up believing certain things, things that were codified in the holy scriptures – and what he's realizing is that God's vision is bigger than what the Jewish Law had said. God was doing a *new thing*. It was time for Peter to get on board.

So Peter tells his eager audience about Jesus. As Peter talks, the Holy Spirit shows up. Cornelius and his companions begin speaking in tongues and praising God. It was happening again, like it had on the day of Pentecost, a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, except this time it wasn't falling on a large group of *Jews*; this time, it was falling on a large group of *Gentiles*. The boundary lines were changing.

Disappearing. Peter realizes: if *these* people can receive the Holy Spirit – that means *anyone* can.

He says: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” The answer is *no*; *no one* can withhold the water; *these people* belong to the Church of Jesus Christ *just as much as Peter himself does*. Even though they’re Romans. Even though the Jews call them “unclean.” Cornelius and his companions are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

When Peter goes to Jerusalem, he finds that word about his visit with Cornelius has already reached the Christians there. Some of them are not happy. “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” So, Peter tells his story. A quick summary won’t do; a headline won’t suffice. He had to tell the whole story, from start to finish. They listen. They learn. They grow. Their eyes are opened. They realize, like Peter did, that God was up to something far bigger than they had previously imagined. They praise God, saying, “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

This was the beginning: the beginning of the spreading of the gospel to the Roman world. From there, the gospel would spread throughout Europe. Eventually it would come to America, and people like us. But it might not have happened. It might not have happened, if Cornelius hadn’t listened to the angel. It might not have happened, if Peter hadn’t listened to the voice of God. It might not have happened, if Peter hadn’t been willing to suspend his preconceptions and be open to what Cornelius had to say. It might not have happened, if Cornelius hadn’t been willing to listen to Peter’s testimony. It might not have happened, if the Christians back in Jerusalem hadn’t been willing to listen to Peter’s tale.

You see how important *listening* is. *Listening* for the voice of God. *Listening* to the genuine stories of what God is doing in other people’s lives. *Being open* to ongoing movement of the Holy Spirit.

I’m not sure our society today is very good at all that. Real *listening*. There is so much rhetoric, so much division, so many people who are *trying* to talk, but their words are being misconstrued, silenced, not heard. Truth gets distorted, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes *very* intentionally. People react to biased headlines; they don’t read the whole story; they don’t bother with the details; they want to stick with what they *wish* to be true; they don’t open themselves up to the possibility that *God might be doing a new thing*, that there might be *a new or different truth* that needs to be heard.

This is not the way of God. It builds and reinforces walls, “dividing walls of hostility,” like the chasm that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles in the time of Jesus. Walls that need to *fall*.

What we desperately need is more real *listening*, like the listening that Peter did, that Cornelius did, that the Christians in Jerusalem did. White people listening to the voices of Black people, and other minorities. Well-off people listening to the voices of the poor. Citizens listening to the voices of refugees who are fleeing for their lives. Leaders listening to the voices of *all* their constituents, not just their loyal fans. Listening for *truth*. Listening for the *Holy Spirit*. Let’s not waste time listening to people who tell lies; we’re not going to find the Holy Spirit there. God speaks through *truth*. We might hear some things that make us uncomfortable. We might learn some things that challenge our assumptions. We might discover that some things we thought were true aren’t true at all. We might realize that our viewpoint is limited, biased, narrow-minded, short-sighted. We might begin to see things in a new way. We might *grow*. We might realize that God is up to something bigger than we had previously imagined.

We might hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. And the dividing lines of hostility might begin to fall.

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