

Off to Cornelius' House: Acts 10:44-48 (Acts 10:1-11:26)

The text for today's sermon (Acts 10:44-48) is part of a much larger story of how the church grew and spread in those early days, and how century-old barriers between people were being broken in ways that would have been inconceivable were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the story of how the church, which was comprised primarily of Jewish converts, interacted with and related to the decidedly non-Jewish and non-Christian culture around them. The church leaders came to a profoundly transforming understanding of what it meant that Jesus really did come to save all of humanity and that God's love and favour were for everyone, not just the Jews.

Let's take a look at the story.

Scene 1 - Acts 10:1-8: We are introduced to Cornelius, a Roman citizen and soldier who is religiously devout. We are told that he highly respects God, prays regularly, and cares for the poor. We should note that God is already at work in his life even before Peter showed up. If you had asked Peter if God was at work in the life of a Roman soldier, he probably would have given you a sermon on God's preference for the Jewish people and God's judgment on the Gentiles whose uncleanness was contagious and who, therefore, should be avoided at all costs.

Cornelius is having terrifying dreams about God and His angels, and is given the bizarre task of going to find a Jewish man named Simon Peter. So, he sends his messengers off to Joppa (which was about 50 miles away) in order to fulfill the task God's angels give him in the dream.

Scene 2 – Acts 10:9-16: Peter is having strange dreams as well. Peter's vision includes a sheet filled with all kinds of unclean animals with the voice of God telling him to commit the abhorrent sin of killing and eating forbidden food. In this scene, God starts the work of convincing Peter to break the clean/unclean barrier, but this is hard work as it takes 3 visions to get through to Peter.

Scene 3 – Acts 10:17-23a: As Peter is contemplating what this weird dream was all about, the Roman messengers arrive at Peter's house and bang on his door. You might imagine Peter's terror in discovering that the Romans are coming for him. He wouldn't have known if he was being carted off to jail or whether he was being brought before the authorities to die a horrible death.

Scene 4 – Acts 10:23b-33: The tension is building. Peter goes with the soldiers to the home of Cornelius and there takes place an unprecedented meeting between the church and the Gentiles. Imagine what that would have been like for Peter to set foot into a Gentile home for the first time. Peter had been taught from childhood that there were certain kinds of people that you just don't hang out with. Barriers are coming down.

- What would it be like for you to set foot in one of the smoke stained, urine and vomit smelling apartments above the Coach, or to be welcomed into

the house of a devout Muslim, or Buddhist – either way you'd be pretty uncomfortable

- What have you been taught from childhood about different ethnic groups or class groups?
- How many of us have taught our own children to avoid certain groups of people: the high school kids who use drugs or abuse alcohol, the kids who smoke, or the kids who get into trouble on Friday night.
- How many of us have turned up our noses at certain class groups of people because we've been taught that they are lazy and have a poor work ethic? How many of us get nervous when we see a group of young people from a different ethnicity walking down the street making a lot of noise? How many of us cross to the other side of the road?

Some of us might think we have evolved beyond such petty stereotypical judgments and are loving and accepting of all people. Some of us might think we are completely justified in making these kinds of judgments. We want our kids to be safe and to have positive influences and role models. We might have some pretty good reasons for thinking the way we do, or making these silent internal judgments, but so did Peter. And God was about to turn Peter's world, everything he had been taught from childhood, upside down.

Scene 5 – Acts 10:34-43: Peter looks around the room at all the faces that are fixed on him, expecting him to say something profound. And Peter begins to preach the gospel message of Jesus' salvation.

Have you ever thought about what you would say to one of your friends in the same situation who had either no experience with the church, or whose church experience had been negative? Have you ever thought about what you would say to the radical Muslim or devout Buddhist about what you know to be true about God and His work in Jesus Christ? Peter didn't make any judgments about what Cornelius believed and he didn't make any comparisons between what pagan practices of the Gentiles and the religious convictions of the Jewish Christians. He just told them what he had experienced of Jesus and how God had convicted him of the truth.

Scene 6 – Acts 10:44-48: A miracle happens! Peter didn't even get through his sermon! The Holy Spirit just busted in and interrupted the whole thing and the rules about who was in and who was out that had been written in stone for centuries were smashed into pieces. The result: Cornelius and everyone else in the house are converted and God blesses them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter himself is converted to the inclusive love of God, and the era of salvation for everyone begins.

In that moment, the kingdom of God was opened up where it would have been closed otherwise. The rules were changed to allow us in – you and me Gentiles. If the rules were changed to allow us in, who are we to prevent God from blessing whomever he chooses to bless – particularly those we are much more comfortable keeping on the outside?

Scene 7 – Acts 11:1-18: Now that God’s saving work has been extended to the Gentiles – *even the Gentiles!* - the church is faced with a question: How will it receive these new Gentile converts? What about circumcision? What about the Jewish laws? Will the Gentile converts have to buy into the whole Jewish history, or will the work of the Holy Spirit be enough?

This event that Luke recounts for us in Acts demonstrates the way in which the early church really did spread beyond the area around Jerusalem, all across the Mediterranean. The power of the Holy Spirit was so strong that people from other religions and ethnicities, government officials, and even your average “non-religious” person off the street were coming to believe the good news that Jesus had saved them, and that God had opened wide the kingdom of heaven to the whole earth. Imagine a massive outpouring of the Spirit here in Jerusalem, spreading in a wave from here to Collingwood, Orillia, Peterborough, and way on out to Quebec and the East Coast. Imagine the cultural changes that would be taking place. Imagine the communities that would be formed.

When it comes to figuring out where church and culture meet, or what the role of the church is in the world, church folks tend to be reluctant to go out and share the good news of God’s work in Jesus Christ with the rest of the world. We are much more comfortable telling ourselves that those folks out there are perfectly welcome to come in and find out for themselves if they like. Our doors are open. Heck, we might even spice things up a bit to make our doors a bit more appealing. Most of us are pretty comfortable with the way things are. This is what we’ve been taught since we were kids: this building or a building like it, these moral principles, this particular way that God loves and calls us to service. This is what has shaped our lives for decades. We are like Peter and every other good Jesus believing Jew who was faithful, devout, committed, and convicted. We are good Jesus believing Christians who are faithful, devout, committed to love and serve others, and convicted that God’s love is for everyone. But what if God is calling us, like he called Peter, to something bigger? What if God is calling us to be a part of something that is bigger than what we do right here? God sent Peter to Cornelius’ house. What if he is sending us out as well?

Where does the church today need to move out into? What might it look like for us to be open to the work of God’s Spirit among the poor, the young, the old, the super-busy over-committed middle-class family, and the under-committed unemployed struggling family?

Peter was a man who was torn between custom and conviction, between tradition and change. God showed Peter that He wasn’t limited by ethnicity, class, tradition or change. The transforming work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ transcended all of those distinctions, and inspired the church to get over itself and start getting in on the world-changing work that God was doing.

What might the church in Canada look like if we believed that God might be sending us to Cornelius’ house: sending us to the house of the person who feels judged by the church or the person who has ample reason for judging the church, sending us to the

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house of the person who hasn't showered for a month, sending us to the ice-rink to be with the family who is never home and who, quite frankly, isn't all that concerned about the things the church thinks are important?

The early church exploded because Christians were convinced that God's Spirit was at work. We are talking miracles of transformed lives! We are talking a change in the known world order! What might the church look like if we followed Peter to Cornelius' house? Maybe, we like Peter, would be converted too...