

MESSAGE

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SCRIPTURE Acts 10:1-16

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" ⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. ⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

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When I was a US-2 missionary and we were in training, we spent a lot of time learning about and dealing with prejudice, racism, and in general, our internal reactions and responses when it came to people outside of our own race, gender, background, traditions, and culture.

There I sat with the idealism of my faith along with the naivete of my background: white, middle-class, small mid-western town. What did I really know first-hand of diversity? What did I really know first-hand of people being together except that "others" should fit into my culture.

It was easy training and it was hard training.

It was easy because it is easy to theoretically understand and agree with the concepts that God loves everyone and what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28 <sup>28</sup> *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

And I could wrap myself around such ideology. I could get excited about the kingdom of God which is open to all, as it says in our baptismal questions of faith: *Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

And the training was hard because as we all sat there nodding in agreement, shaking our heads at stories of prejudice and injustice, our trainers also said to us: be prepared because you will run up against your internal prejudices. You sit here thinking they are not there or that you have torn down those walls, but someday you will find yourself hitting that wall and having to deal once again with your internal "stuff" in order to do God's work.

And that is how I think of this story in Acts.

God's mission needed to keep moving and building momentum – and not just in the same community it started. It needed to go "to the ends of the earth" as Jesus' last instruction to the disciples said: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

The ends of the earth included everyone...not just Jewish people.

And that was going to present its issues as God was going to bring distinctively different people together – people who otherwise would not seek to be together, not build relationships, and certainly not eat together. How could they "remember Jesus" in the breaking of the bread if they couldn't sit at the table together?

This story gives us a pretty elaborate "behind-the-scenes" look at the orchestrations God goes through to make this happen.

A vision comes to Cornelius – God wants him to meet Peter.

This is a man whose spirit is ready to receive Jesus.

This is a man whose piety has been seen by God.

This is a man who God recognizes as being strategically placed: he's the commander of 100 soldiers. A centurion. He has position and influence and if he can learn about Jesus, what a great opportunity for the Jesus movement to gain momentum.

Cornelius responds in faithfulness – sends for Peter.

A vision comes to Peter – God needs him to be ready to meet and share Jesus with Cornelius.

This orchestration is going to need a little more persuasion.

The vision is of all kinds of foods ....

And it's hard for Peter to take in this new teaching.

And I get it. This is how he was raised.

According to the Law, no Jew should eat particular foods.

Bacon-wrapped shrimp....

Crab cakes.....

BBQ....

Whole-hog sausage at a pancake breakfast....

And the vision to him is go ahead and eat.

The message to him is: do not call unclean that which I have cleaned.

This is the big, life and faith-altering experience for Peter.

And he needs to take it in – and soon because no sooner has he had it that the doorbell rings and it is Cornelius' men coming to see him.

How will he respond? Let's listen:

Acts 10:17-33

<sup>17</sup> While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. <sup>18</sup> They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. <sup>19</sup> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three<sup>[a]</sup> men are looking for you. <sup>20</sup> So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." <sup>21</sup> Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" <sup>22</sup> The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to

say.”<sup>23</sup> Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along.<sup>24</sup> The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.<sup>25</sup> As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.<sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”<sup>27</sup> While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.<sup>28</sup> He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.<sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”<sup>30</sup> Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me<sup>31</sup> and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor.<sup>32</sup> Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’<sup>33</sup> So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

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Peter boldly does a new thing.

He breaks out of his tradition....and acknowledges it: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.”

And he figures out the meaning of the vision: it wasn’t just that he could go to Red Lobster – the vision was to teach him to think differently and act differently and live differently with people he was supposed to be different from.

It wasn’t just that the food was no longer to be considered “unclean”

People weren’t to be considered “unclean”:

But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.

And while we cheer and nod our heads in agreement with this kingdom development, much like I did in US-2 training, we also are being called to ask ourselves: “Who is my Cornelius?”

Because “Cornelius” may still be on the other side of any one of our walls.

Cornelius might be someone who doesn’t speak English.

Cornelius might be someone of a different race; a different skin color.

Cornelius might be someone of a different nation and culture.

Cornelius might be someone who is gay.

Cornelius might be someone who is unhoused.

Cornelius might be someone of a different faith background or no faith background.

Cornelius might be someone urban or someone rural.

"Cornelius" is anyone who we might use the words, "yeah, but they are....." as we run into the brick walls that have been either given to us or constructed by us.

So, "Who is your Cornelius?"

And can you hear God saying, "do not call anyone unclean that God has made clean"?

Who is your Cornelius?

It's an important question....because the mission of the church needs to move forward in this world. And God is calling to us to use us in that mission.