

March 19, 2023
Sermon Manuscript

Acts 10:1-11:4, 11:18 (NIV)

Cornelius Calls for Peter

¹ 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.

Peter’s Vision

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.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

²² 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.” ²³ 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.

Peter at Cornelius’s House

²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰ 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 ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² 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.’ ³³ 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.”

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with

him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸ So he ordered that

they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Peter Explains His Actions

11:¹ The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story...

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Learning from Peter learning from Cornelius

During this season of Lent, many of us have been gathering on Wednesday nights to consider how we might live our Lives on Mission in the way that Jesus did, aided by the insights of Gravity Leadership. And to continue with that, this morning I had us look at the story from Acts 10 about Peter and Cornelius to that same end. This passage never appears in our three year lectionary of Sunday scriptures, surely due to its length. But I put this passage before you to illustrate the good news that **God's call for us to Live On Mission is not just intended to bring transformation into the lives of others we might minister to, but to us as well: as he intends to make us more like Jesus by propelling us through our discomfort with being uncomfortable.**

A question I want to pose this morning is what sorts of people can you *least* imagine wanting to be around? Thinking about all the different sorts of people in this world - from class to race to politics to lifestyle - what sorts of people can you least imagine wanting to be around? Now, I'm not talking about hanging out with active gang members or something - so let's say you knew you would be safe from harm or abuse - who would you least want to hang out with?

- Maybe it's people of a certain politics or lifestyle - maybe it's folks who would be marching for abortion or transgender rights or maybe it's folks who are still wearing red hats and would enthusiastically attend CPAC
- Maybe it's people who earn their living in a way you don't like?
- Maybe people of a certain ethnicity or religion that just seems otherworldly or too different - or where you had a negative interaction with someone from that group long ago and just sorta decided “never again”?

In Life Groups we've asked the ice breaker question before: if you could have dinner with 3 or 4 people in all the world, who would you most *like* it to be with? Well, I'm asking what sort of people you'd least like to have dinner with.

And the reason I'm asking this is because for those of us who are interested in Living on Mission, God wants to help us become more like Jesus in the way he was willing to transgress the social, religious, and cultural barriers that divide us from others. We saw last week how Jesus crossed a significant cultural barrier of his day in speaking with a woman in public who was a Samaritan, and by even going into Samaria in the first place. Well, one theme of the book of Acts, which recounts the time period of the early Church following Jesus' resurrection and ascension - one theme of Acts is that we see God calling his people to go and be with people they wouldn't otherwise want to be with.¹ And this is

¹ Observed by Willie Jennings

because **God's call for us to Live On Mission is not just intended to bring transformation into the lives of others we might minister to, but to us as well: as he intends to make us more like Jesus by propelling us through our discomfort with being uncomfortable.**

In today's scripture from Acts chapter 10, we see God doing just that with Peter. Down at verse 9, the passage picks up with Peter when he's staying in the city of Joppa. And one day at noon he's on the rooftop, because it would've been cooler than inside the house, and it's lunchtime so he's getting hungry. But all of a sudden Peter falls into a trance and the Lord gives him a vision of a large sheet coming down. And on this sheet were all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds, and the voice of God says to him, in verse 13: "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." And Peter is absolutely horrified by this. Even though Peter had come to Christ, as an ethnic Jew he still kept Kosher - he had for his whole life - and a lot of the animals on that sheet were strictly forbidden to eat. But I think even we can relate to this, in part. I mean, kosher or not, what if at fellowship hour today the ACW had a spread of garter snake and roasted pigeon; how many of us would be reaching for a plate? I'm guessing not many; and we'd probably still be talking about it years from now.

But God is commanding Peter to "kill and eat". And the thought of this probably makes him viscerally sick. So Peter replies in verse 14, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." But the voice responds, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." And sure enough, during Jesus' earthly ministry, years before, St Mark tells us that had Jesus declared all food clean, as you can see in the sermon supplement box in your bulletin.²

However, it's one thing for Jesus to say that, and it's another thing to comply. Just like it's one thing for Jesus to tell us "love our neighbor" and "pray for those who persecute us", but for us to actually *do that* is a whole 'nother matter. #

Now it doesn't seem like these animals were actually physically there for Peter to eat; it was just a vision, after all. But we're told Peter had this vision three times. So he's there on the rooftop wondering what all this means when suddenly there's a knock at his door. And standing at the door, Peter finds men who were sent by a centurion named Cornelius, who is inviting Peter to his home in Caesarea. And Cornelius is absolutely a gentile - he's Roman military - so for Peter to even enter his home would've been a major religious faux pas for a Jew in those days.

Well, fast-forwarding to verse 28, when Peter arrives at Cornelius' home, he even tells everyone gathered there, straight up: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile." And he goes on to explain that the only reason he is there is because God had shown him (through the vision) that he should not call anyone impure or unclean. But regardless of what God showed him in the vision, Peter is clearly still *very uncomfortable* to be there!

And yet, what he finds in Cornelius, and in all the people gathered there, are people of peace. Obviously, by welcoming Peter into his house, Cornelius is welcoming Peter and showing a willingness to serve him. But he is also willing - *and eager* - to receive from Peter spiritually. As a result of a vision that Cornelius, himself had way back in verse 4, He says to Peter in verse 33, "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

And it is at that moment that Peter has an epiphany. In verse 34, he says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." However, Peter had already learned this mentally before he even showed up, but there's something about being with people, particularly people whom we have othered - whom we have

² Mark 7:18b-23

(Jesus said,) "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

diminished in our hearts maybe for a long time - there's something about standing there with them and talking to them, on their turf, that can do for our hearts what a thousand sermons or visions cannot. The good news is that **God's call for us to Live On Mission is not just intended to bring transformation into the lives of others we might minister to, but to us as well: as he intends to make us more like Jesus by propelling us through our discomfort with being uncomfortable.**

Peter learned *experientially* that Jesus came & died not just for the Jews, but for the sake of the whole world,³ of all people. And this is something we all may know or learn mentally - we affirm it almost every Sunday in our liturgy in the Comfortable Words - but sometimes for us to really believe something, head knowledge is not enough: sometimes we need to experience it is true in order to really believe it.

The good news is that **God's call for us to Live On Mission is not just intended to bring transformation into the lives of others we might minister to, but to us as well: as he intends to make us more like Jesus by propelling us through our discomfort with being uncomfortable.**

But think about what courage it took for Peter to ever even *have* that experience...

- He had to be willing to follow the Lord's lead *despite his* discomfort.
- He had to walk into a situation where he had zero control; no moorings, except His trust in the Lord; very little assurance for what the boundaries *were* between right and wrong, except His confidence that the Lord would guide him.
- And Peter also went at great risk of being misunderstood by his own community. Notice, in the part I included at the end from chapter 11, that when the other apostles and believers hear about this, they aggressively confront Peter in Jerusalem, saying, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them(?!?!)" And once they heard Peter's story, they understood, but there was no *guarantee* they would.

And all of this illustrates the good news that **God's calling us to Live On Mission is not just intended to bring transformation into the lives of others we might minister to, but to us as well: as he intends to make us more like Jesus by propelling us through our discomfort with being uncomfortable.**

Change - transformation - is not easy; it requires a tolerance for discomfort!! When I honestly consider how willing *I've ever been* to be uncomfortable - about anything - I'm not too fond of the answer. But I am beginning to learn that a willingness to push through discomfort - seeking God's help to push through it faithfully - is downright critical part for entering more into the life of the kingdom. And for making a kingdom impact in others lives, as well.

So because Cornelius and company were People of Peace, but also because Peter was a Person of Peace *toward them*, God is able to do something remarkable between them. Verse 44 says, "While Peter was still speaking... the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles." And Peter saw no reason why they shouldn't be baptized and they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. the good news that **God's calling us to Live On Mission is not just intended to bring transformation into the lives of others we might minister to, but to us as well: as he intends to make us more like Jesus by propelling us through our discomfort with being uncomfortable.**

Every one of us carries biases, grievances, stereotypes, and so on, against different sorts of people that blind us to the image of God them, and that they are just as precious to the Lord as we are, that Jesus came and died for them and us alike. We saw another common bias from Jesus' day in our gospel passage,⁴ with the assumptions about a man born blind. The thing about our biases is they're never very rational; they're based in fear. And some of us may have come by those things very honestly -

³ 1 Jn 2:1-2

⁴ John 9:1-11

from traumatic experiences or from parents teaching us what they thought was best or wisdom when it actually wasn't. But a blessing of the Great Commission - for us to live our lives on mission, sent out to make disciples of all peoples - a blessing with that that is often missed is that if we take it seriously and are willing, God will lead us into experiences that will help us shake off the chains of our trauma and our forefathers' traumas in a way that no argument or logic or Bible verse ever could. A willingness to live our lives on mission is part of God's plan for leading us more into the fullness of life Christ has for us, into making us more *like* Jesus.

So if we've detected in our hearts any barriers - any people for whom we say "no lord, send me to anybody but them," like Jonah and the Ninevites :) or where you have a visceral reaction like Peter, "surely not, Lord," "surely I can't possibly love and look for the good in them" - would you be willing to name that before the Lord and ask him to change your heart, or show you the next step toward an experience that just might?

Would you be so bold as to pray with me?

Lord, have mercy in our fragile human hearts. There is so much fear within, that part of us thinks keeps us safe, but that also keeps us imprisoned. Lord, we take a moment to name those fears before you today. Thank you God for other people, for those different from us, for those we don't understand. Thank you for creating the world with such beautiful diversity. Thank you for calling us to love and make disciples of all nations. Help us to live our Lives on Mission not only for the sake of others, but for our own sakes, and for your sake as well.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Source used: Gravity Leadership, "Church in the Wild"