

Message Delivered at Christ Church

May 1st & 2nd, 2010

TEXT: Acts 11:1-18

Message delivered by Paul A. Johnson

I want to do a little Bible teaching this morning; talk a little about a Bible story. It's not a real famous story. But it's an important one for those of us who are part of the Church; and it's an important one for our neighborhood; and it's really important for those of us here today who may be wondering if God's got a space for you...and if today you are part of that third group, right now I just want to tell you that he does...

The story I want to tell you is the preface to what we read from Acts this morning. We read the beginning of Acts chapter 11 this morning. But what I want to talk about is Acts 10, which sets up what we heard today. And the assignment I want to give you is to read Acts 10 for yourself sometime today., which is the end of the story that takes place in Acts chapter 10—which is the one I want to talk about.

The two main human characters in the story are Peter and a man named Cornelius. Now we know about Peter, but Cornelius is a Roman centurion. Here's what that means: As a centurion, he's like a colonel in the Roman army. He oversees Roman soldiers whose job is to keep the Jewish subjects in line...which means by force, if necessary. Remember that the Jewish people were an oppressed people; the Romans were the oppressors; and Cornelius is a Roman.

Which also means he's a Gentile. That means from the Jewish perspective, he's an outsider. He's different. He's not circumcised; he doesn't go to the synagogue; he doesn't know the scriptures; he doesn't observe the practices of the Temple; he doesn't adhere to all the proscriptions of the Law; he's unclean. As a Gentile he is not part of God's plan. He is not a beneficiary of God's saving work.

Now the story says that Cornelius was a good Gentile. He's got a good heart. He knows God; he prays; he gives alms; he loves and fears God...and to fear God means to be in awe of God. He's not an enemy of God; he's not a persecutor. He's a good and godly man...you would want him as your neighbor.

But still, he's a Gentile.

Now for the tension in this story to make sense, we have to understand something about the first community of Christian believers...gonna do a little church history here: The first community of believers in Jerusalem was a community of people who started by being Jewish. Their background was Jewish; they came out of Judaism. Now these first believers...they really weren't too different from us. They were just normal folks. They were just regular human beings, which means they acted just like regular human beings...which in this case means that when they started to follow Jesus they still held on to some of their old beliefs and understandings. We do that, don't we...

So while they accepted Jesus as the Messiah and followed him, they also thought that to be a follower of Jesus it was important to be Jewish. Their understanding was that part of being Christian meant that one needed to be Jewish first...to be circumcised if one was male; to know the scriptures; to follow the Law; to

worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. That was their self-understanding. You see, the way they understood the faith and the Church, there was no room in the inn for someone like Cornelius (no matter how good he was)...unless he decided to become Jewish first. The resurrection had blown the doors off their understanding of God and God's kingdom. But the windows were still intact, and tightly closed against people like Cornelius...unless someone like Cornelius first believed the way they thought he should believe, and behaved the way they thought he should behave. Only then could he belong.

Now that's the background. Here's the story: Cornelius the Roman centurion lives in a place called Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in ancient Palestine. One afternoon, God comes to him in a vision and tells him that his prayers and his alms—his good works and right living—have been noticed by the Lord. So God tells him to send some servants to a town called Joppa for a man named Peter.

As these servants approach the house where Peter is staying in Joppa, Peter is on the roof, and receiving his own vision. It says that he was hungry, and while his meal was being prepared he saw a sheet being lowered onto the roof filled with animals that the Jewish Law said were unclean; in other words, food that a good Jew would never eat. God tells him to kill and eat the animals, but Peter...who no matter what seems to remain loveably frustrating Peter—refuses because he's never eaten anything unclean. That's not what an obedient disciple does. And the Lord replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And because—I guess—Peter is stubborn, this vision happens two more times. Even still, it says, Peter was puzzled by the whole thing. Sometimes, it just takes us a while...

While Peter is sitting on the roof trying to figure this whole thing out, the servants of Cornelius knock on the door. It says that the Spirit told Peter to answer the door, and go with whomever it was that was there. God just keeps giving Peter instructions.

The men explain their mission...they tell him all about Cornelius and how he was told to fetch Peter. After a good night's rest, Peter and some of his friends travel with them back to Caesarea.

When they arrive there, it's clear that Cornelius really doesn't understand the whole thing because he bows down and tries to start worshiping Peter. And Peter—who also doesn't really understand what's going on, either--responds: "You know it's not right for me to be here; I'm Jewish and you're not. But God taught me to not call anything profane. So why did you send for me?"

Cornelius described what's happened—and now, he says, they are all here...Cornelius and his friends and his family...to hear what Peter has to say...

So what's this follower of Jesus; this pillar of the Church—this really important guy who's been with Jesus from the beginning and who like all of his other followers has this certain understanding of the parameters of God's work—what's he going to say now that he's in the middle of all these Gentiles, eyeball to eyeball?

Well, what he says are some of the most remarkable words in scripture: "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." Now let me say that again..."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."

It may be the most significant “aha!” moment in the New Testament, and may we praise God for teachable spirits. Because this is when the first believers recognized that God invites everybody into the kingdom, not just those we think should be invited; that anybody...regardless of their origin, or background, or color, or whatever...all those who honor God and seek what is right are acceptable to God, and welcome in the community. There won't be any more lines. There will no longer be this Jewish/Gentile division. In fact, it was never supposed to be that way in the first place.

Peter's speech goes on, and afterwards the Holy Spirit descends upon that small group, and they speak in tongues the exact same way the first set of Jewish believers did in Jerusalem at the first Pentecost. “How can anyone not baptize these persons who the Holy Spirit so clearly is working in?” Peter says, and all of them were baptized.

Now all of that leads up to this story from Acts we read today, which is a gathering together of the story I just told. Peter goes back to the home office, and is greeted by a bunch of guys standing with their arms crossed. “What's all this we hear about you visiting the uncircumcised?” You see, because that ain't the way it works. They're not part of the legacy. They're not going to get what we got. And so Peter tells the story about what happened, and to their credit, they listen to what happened and accept that God is doing something brand new.

Now, y'all...I got to tell you...this is a pretty simple message this morning; I'm not getting very fancy. That's the story, and I think it leaves us with a couple things to chew on, both individually and as a people...

It is, obviously, a story that challenges our own prejudices and assumptions. We don't think of clean and unclean in exactly the same way as Peter and his companions did; we don't use that language anymore. But we still have the tendency to draw lines. It just seems to be a thing human beings do, even among the community of believers. In the history of the Church we've drawn these lines based on color; we've drawn them based on ethnic background; we've drawn them based on gender; we've drawn them based on sexual orientation; we've drawn them based on class; we've drawn them based on denominational affiliation...because we're as human as these first believers. We draw these lines to feel safe and because we like to feel we're in control.

But we're not in control, and God shows no partiality; and apparently the Lord takes far more pleasure in surprising us with the wideness of God's mercy and grace and love than the Lord does obeying our preconceptions.

Every once in a while it's good to be reminded that God's plans are bigger than our own. The lines aren't nearly as distinct as we sometimes want to make them. So that I'll make a bet right now that when I stand in the Lord's nearer presence, I'm going to be amazed at who's standing next to me. It's not going to fit our expectations. Because the Lord is not controlled by us, and I'm not sure we can fathom the power of the Lord's complete and utter impartiality. When we step back from ourselves, it's funny how much energy we spend on being right, and how deeply we yearn for the assurance that our understanding is the correct understanding. When maybe, what we ought to be focused on is going out, loving the best way we know how—no matter Jew or Gentile—and then let God do the heavy lifting while we relish the surprise that comes when something we didn't think possible is revealed.

That's a first lesson from this story. Here's a second...and I think it's deeper than what I just offered...

When you go home and read Acts 10 tonight, you will see that the tension in the story is around Peter and his friends. It's not around Cornelius. The question in the story is whether Peter and the rest of them in Jerusalem will have eyes to see that God is already at work in Caesarea and Cornelius before Peter ever gets there.

You see, this is a story of Peter and the rest discovering that God is already at work in the neighborhood...that God is busy in the neighborhood, and going ahead of us; that God is active "out there" in surprising ways, unhindered by any human being. They don't make any of this happen. God just reveals it to them, and they discover it.

And the lesson, I think, is really simple...but I think it's one we overlook way too easy (at least I do). There is a beautiful reality about where each of us live: God is at work there...in our neighborhoods; in our neighbors; in the schools; at work; on the soccer field; absolutely wherever. It may not always be obvious. We don't always have eyes to see it; we may have to look for it...but I'm telling you that the Lord is busy...already...in Twin Hickory; or Pine Run; or Mechanicsville; or wherever it is we are; and our job as the Church is to keep our eyes open, and to follow God's lead.

That's what this story we're all going to read tonight at home is deeply about...how God is ahead of us, already doing good things where we live, and inviting us to come alongside and share in the work.

So I want to give us another assignment...and I think it's a something that will make a huge difference where you live: when we go home after worship and drive into our neighborhoods today, pray for them; remember that the cross is already there; and recognize that your neighborhood is a holy place. All those streets, and cul-de-sacs, and homes, and people you know, and people you don't know—wherever it is you live, or work, or go to school...God is already there, and doing good things. And these neighbors of ours...well, if God is working on Cornelius in Caesarea, God is working on them, too; so may we come alongside God's work.

God's love and mercy and grace and kingdom is huge; it's bigger than our minds or imaginations; the Lord is busy already, and doesn't wait for our approval to get started. It just happens. So like Peter—and also like his friends in Jerusalem who today learn something new about how big God is—may we be blessed with eyes to see, and with the conviction to go boldly—because that is what Peter does--and be part of it.