

Living as a Connector

Acts 10:1-48

January 27, 2008

This is another story of how God connected two unlikely people – and changed them both. There's a man named Cornelius who clearly does not know Jesus yet. And then there's a man named Simon Peter who is a follower of Jesus. Most people call this story the "conversion of Cornelius," but it should be called the "conversion of Peter." Peter was a good man whose "religion" kept him away from people. Cornelius was a good man whose "religion" kept him one step away from God. God will bring these two unlikely people together and will convert both of them to a whole new way of thinking and living.

This is a crucial story – it's long, it gets repeated twice (see chapter 11) and it addresses a watershed issue for the early church: How wide will the church go? Is church basically inward-focused or is the church a reaching-out, radically-loving, enemy-loving, newcomer-inviting community? Does the church stop at the doors or does the church reach out and serve and welcome the community at our doorsteps? Is the church for my ethnic, cultural, national group or is the church for every nation, tribe and tongue? Are we connecting people with Jesus or not?

So let's look at the six scenes (please refer to the chart on page 6 which outlines the six scenes in this story):

Scene #1 – in verse 1 we meet a man named Cornelius and he's a very good man and he's also very successful. He has an excellent job as the captain of a regiment of soldiers. And we learn in verse 2 that "he and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly." The "God-fearers" were a group of Romans who weren't raised as Jews but who were attracted to the Jewish vision of life. So Cornelius is very sincere in his religious practices; he's honest and generous and a good person. But there's also something missing in his life. He has a gap in his spirituality. Before Bruce Springsteen came along Cornelius knows that everyone has a hungry heart. So Cornelius is religious and doing the best he can but he also senses that his best just won't cut it. So in verse 3 we read that he's praying at about 3:00 pm when an angel shows up in his prayer life and calls out to him, "Cornelius, your prayers and your gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God."

We notice here how God treats good, decent, generous, moral people. Notice that God is pleased because what they are doing is right and good. It is good to do nice things for people. However, there's also a catch here: our good deeds do not make us right before a holy God. Our basic problem runs deeper than just trying to do nice things for people and doing favors for God. According to the Bible, our deepest problem is this: our sin separates us from God – and we all have enough of it – so we need someone to forgive us, to wipe the slate clean – or else we're all in big trouble.

So Cornelius has part of the story and God will ensure that he gets the rest of the story. In verse 5 we read that he's supposed to send men to a seaside city of Joppa and ask for a man named Simon Peter. Simon will connect Cornelius to get the rest of the story. Now, as I was reading

this I wondered: why didn't the angel just "cut to the chase" as we would say and tell Cornelius about Jesus. We could have had a shorter chapter and a much shorter sermon. Instead, God chose to work through this inefficient, lengthy, convoluted process of going to Joppa, getting Peter, giving Peter a vision, bringing Peter back to Cornelius' home. Why the extra steps? Because angels don't share the good news; people do. We are the ones that God uses to serve as connectors.

Almost every week I hear stories about you guys connecting other people to the Lord. Just this last week someone told me this story: "A friend – Person A - invited Person B to church. Person B invited me to church and now I just invited Person D to church." That's how connectors work. It's slow; it's labor intensive; it's inefficient; but it's the way God has chosen to work in the world to bring the good news of Jesus to others. Remember Acts 1:8 – "and you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and to Samaria and the ends of the earth." That's how it gets done.

So scene one ends as Cornelius sends three of his closest workers to go pay a visit to Simon Peter.

Scene #2 - So as Cornelius' little contingent is on the way to visit Peter, he's up on the roof waiting for lunch and praying. As he's praying he "fell into a trance" – or literally an ecstasy. Ecstasy literally means to get outside of oneself. Here's it's not connected to drug use; it's the result of the Holy Spirit as Peter spends time in prayer. Ecstasy means that Jesus wants to get us out of ourselves. Did you ever consider that one of our biggest problems is that we're not ecstatic enough as Christians? By that I mean that we don't get out of ourselves enough. We're content with safe little prayers, safe little worship services, safe little friendships, safe little conversations, safe little groupings of people just like us, but we don't actually pray, "Jesus, get me out of myself. Get me out of my own agenda and my own selfishness and my own petty little concerns. Lift me out of myself and show me the needs around me." Brothers and sister, I speak to myself in this as well, but let's ask God to make us ecstatic, to lift us out of what the novelist Walker Percy calls "the great suck of self." Peter will need to become ecstatic otherwise he will never do what God is going to tell him to do.

In his ecstasy, Peter has a vision about a white sheet filled with animals descending from heaven. The vision represents all the animals that God declared clean and unclean back in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. The dietary laws were a special boundary marker given by God to remind his people that they were special, they were set apart, they were separate from the other nations around them. God classified some of the animals as clean and unclean. Now it's a short step for all of us to start eating clean food only and then to look down on people who eat unclean food. It's a short step from "their dietary habits are unclean – unlike us" to "they are unclean."

So the voice from heaven (i.e. Jesus) tells him to kill the unclean animals and eat them. And Peter, who has never eaten unclean food, is aghast: "Surely not, Lord" he replies in verse 14. Can imagine telling Jesus "no." But in his deepest, most sanctimonious, most religiously-nasally tone, most high-and-mighty, tone of revulsion and disgust Peter tells Jesus, "Not on your life, Lord." This is serious: because he basically tells Jesus, who has appeared to him on

the rooftop right before lunch (you never know when that sneaky fellow is going to show up): “Sorry, Jesus, I can’t do what *you* want because it’s against my religion.” Peter has what we would call scruples. Scruples are moral obligations that prevent us from reaching out in love to other people. They might be real and important convictions but they block the flow of radical, Christ-like love from flowing to others. It could be as clear-cut as racism – “I don’t associate with blacks or Chinese or Koreans or Jewish people.” It could be more subtle – “They have poor taste in music, he has an earring, she has a tattoo, they are homosexuals, they are against or for the war, he’s rich so he must be stuck up, she’s poor so she’s not as important as so-and-so, their ideas are too old or too new, he’s a convict, she’s a single mom” – so I cannot associate with them. They are unclean. Peter’s scruples aren’t bad in themselves. The dietary laws of the Old Testament have served their purpose – and God never asks him to reject the dietary laws, just his scruples about his dietary laws. Scruples are bad when we allow them to build walls between us and other people. Then, as we’ll see in this story, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to come in power and tear the walls down.

Notice those three words: “I have never…” You see, for Peter he’s still a little stuck in that old religious system where everything depends on your track record. I never do this. I always do that. That proves I’m a good person. And then we use our track record to beat people up or to beat ourselves up. You see, when you come to Jesus, you stop looking at your track record. It’s not what matters. What matters is Jesus’ track record.

The funny thing about this story is that Peter lives with Simon the tanner. Tanners worked with dead animals, so technically, Peter was living in an unclean home with a guy who worked in an unclean profession. Of course we make allowances for our scruples if they benefit us! Peter is going to get converted from a good, obedient, scrupulous follower of Jesus who has turned tribal to a good, obedient, radically loving, outward looking, Jesus-connecting follower of Jesus who loves across tribes and nations and languages.

Scene #3 – The Cornelius posse arrives just as Peter is sitting down to eat his kosher sandwich. They show up at the door and tell the story from their boss Cornelius. Peter invites them to spend the night – which was a huge expansion of his love and hospitality because Peter shouldn’t have been associating with all these unclean Gentiles.

Scene #4 – So they traipse back to the home of Cornelius (verse 24) where Cornelius has gathered a mob of relatives and workers all ready to hear what Peter has to say. Peter is a little overwhelmed and replies, (see verse 28) “You are well aware that is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him.” These feelings ran deep, but it wasn’t just the Jews; it was a two-way street. The Gentiles didn’t like the Jews. The animosity ran deep. “Against our law” literally meant “taboo.” That’s the way the world worked: I don’t like you and you don’t like me and let’s leave it that way. But something unusual is happening here. The Holy Spirit is bringing down walls that involved years of suspicion, hostility, hate, prejudice and racial and ethnic snobbery.

That’s why Peter continues by saying, “But God has shown me that I should not call any man unclean.” Wow, that is an amazing statement. Now it doesn’t mean that everyone has their opinion on every issue and truth no longer matters – as in, “just live and let live” or “it doesn’t

matter what you believe as long as you're sincere." Cornelius was sincere, and his sincerity was a good thing, but it wasn't enough to save and forgive his sins. Otherwise we wouldn't even need this sprawling story; it could have ended at scene #1. But Cornelius was missing something – a huge piece, the piece that would complete the process and fulfill his quest for God and good living. He knows it and that's why he gathers himself and his family and his workers and says 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."

"God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean." It means that because of Jesus I can never call anyone – or any group of people – outside the realm of God's grace and mercy and saving power. That's the meaning of the ecstatic vision when God brought Peter out of himself. It means that I can no longer decide – based on my favorite criteria: race, culture, family background, wealth, status, etc. – who will be in and who will be out of God's grace in Jesus. God can break in anytime and anyplace and in the heart of anyone. I can't label anyone "unclean." As in, "you're hopeless; you're unreachable, or you're less reachable and less desirable than other kinds of people."

That's the meaning of verses 34-35. Peter starts his sermon by saying, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism." This is basically a very Jewish, Old Testament idea that's found in places like Leviticus 19:15 which says, "you shall not lift up the face of the poor." You shouldn't look down on yourself because they are poor; not should you shower the rich with special favors or attention. In ancient Near Eastern cultures when you met someone who was your superior you would bow your head. And then if you were the superior person you would lift up your face as a sign that you accepted their inferiority. Peter says that the Good News of Jesus – right in line with the Old Testament - abolishes all of that. If you have a lot of money, sorry, you shouldn't get special privileges. If you don't have a lot of money, you're not a second class member here.

Scene #5 – Then Peter gives his little sermon. It's so much shorter than my sermons. He gets right to the point of why sincerity is not enough: and he cuts right into the story of Jesus. See verse 36 – "peace through Jesus who is Lord of all." Peace didn't just mean peaceful, easy feelings; it meant right relationships, right standing with God, knowing that God and I are at peace, that God is satisfied with my life. We might think, "What do you mean? Of course he's okay with my life? What did I ever do to Him?" The answer to that is that we usually operate on a very different standard than God. God's standard is the purity and beauty and the strength and the tenderness and the courage and love of Jesus Christ. Most of us fall far short of that. So we have a problem. We are alienated from God and we need someone to bridge the gap, heal the wound, reconcile the relationship. That's where Jesus comes in: he's the peacemaker between us and God because he's fully God and fully man. He's the ultimate connector between a sinful humanity and a holy God. And all of this happened when Jesus died on the tree and took our curse upon himself. Through the cross, by taking our curse for us, when we believe in him Jesus is the one who offers forgiveness of sins (See verse 43). But notice Cornelius didn't get forgiven by his sincerity or by his good deeds; he only received forgiveness as a gift by believing in the name of Jesus.

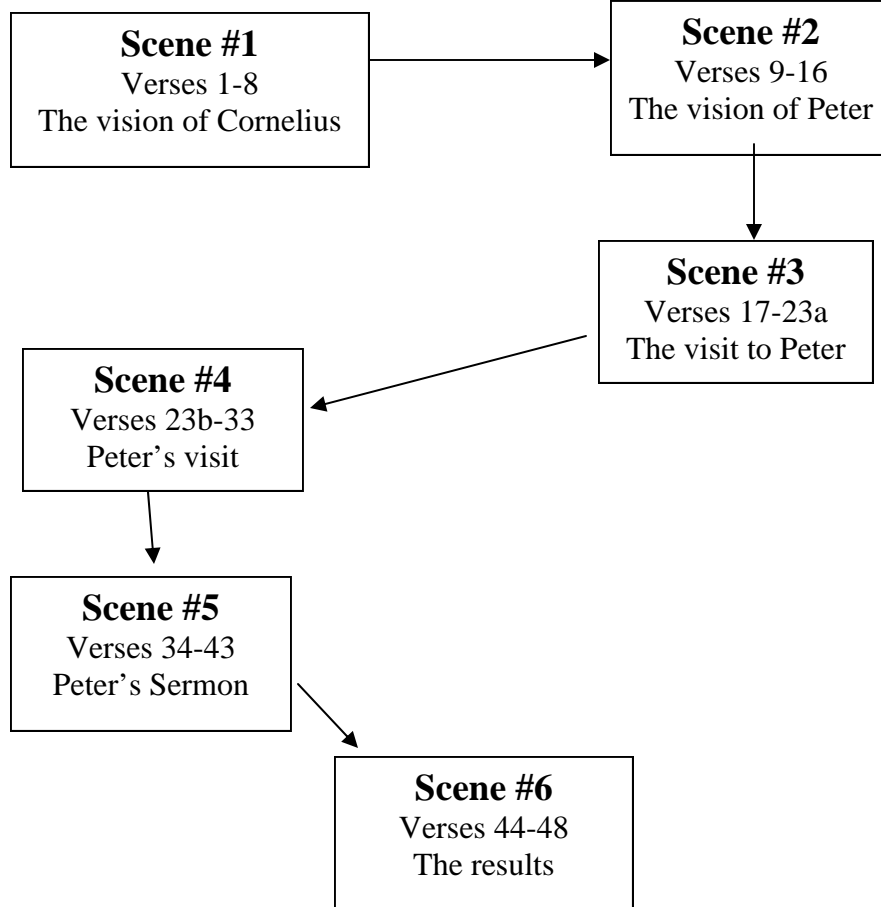
Scene #6 – As he's still speaking, before he even gets done with his little sermon, the Holy Spirit interrupts him and came upon all those who heard the message. The Holy Spirit is the very breath, the power and presence of God for the Holy Spirit is God. See verse 45 – "They were surprised..."

It ends with a beautiful little phrase at the end of verse 48 – “Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.” There they are – this unlikely duo of Peter and Cornelius, the deadly duo, the divided duo, the unlikely, motley, ragged crew of Jesus-followers. Before they knew Jesus they would have had nothing to do with each other. Now they’re hanging out and spending the weekend together.

What are the applications we can draw from this story?

1. **First, we can get connected with God’s through Jesus Christ.** We can receive the amazing gift of forgiveness. Or we could say it this way: sincerity is not enough. Sincerity is good. Honesty is good. Generosity is a good thing. When everyone is nice to their neighbors, when everyone gives to the poor, when everyone helps out, it makes the world a better place. But it doesn’t save us. It can’t forgive our sins. The Gospel is the good news of what God offers to us not what we can do for God. We receive it (see verse 43).
 2. **Second, stay connected to others.** Or we could say it this way: love widely and equally. Scruples prevent our love from going deep; favoritism prevents our love from going wide. Verse 28 and verse 34 – don’t write anyone off. Don’t snub anyone. Like the priest who passed by – this guy was just too messy. It’s the “kootie factor.” The “icky factor.” You’re just kind of icky.
 3. **Third, be a connector for God.** If you are a follower of Jesus, you are a connector. If you’re thinking, “Gee, my neighbor, my friend, my family member is sure a nice person. They are sincere? Do they really need Jesus?” Yes, they do. My conversation with Mike – a profound impact on me. I’m not that special. I’m not the only one around here who connects with others. Erika Glus is a connector. Who do you spend time with? .
- Fourth, support our full-time connectors.** Cornelius would not have received forgiveness without Peter going across culture to meet someone from another tribe or nation or tongue.

**The Conversion of Peter
(and Cornelius)
Acts 10:1-48 in Six Scenes**



1. We can get connected _____ through Jesus.
2. Choose to connect _____.
3. Be a connector _____.
4. Support our _____ - _____ connectors.