

June 11, 2017
Acts 10:34-43
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“Include Possibility”

Good morning! Welcome to our third in the series of five sermons on the book of Acts that we have planned through the end of June. I’ll take it as a good sign that some of you are still here after sermons one and two. A little review of you’ve been away or need to refresh your memory: our series is called Speak Possibility and we heard two weeks ago about Jesus’ promise to his disciples that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. Last week was Pentecost, the Sunday when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to those first apostles, and that those apostles shared about God’s deeds of power, and those gathered were amazed and perplexed, because people from all different tribes and nations heard God’s vision in their own language.

The book of Acts, as we’ve noted earlier, is an account of God’s Spirit and God’s power and how the church began on the day of Pentecost with speaking the possibility of the kingdom of God. We’re told at the end of Acts Chapter 1 that about three thousand people were added to the church that day, and that day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. The story of Pentecost is the beginning of the book of Acts and the beginning of the church; it’s a narrative about God’s power to act through faithful people, and the Spirit working to convert and transform them.

Our text today from Acts chapter 10 is a little further along in the story, and it give us a little twist on this idea of conversion, because the person who is converted in Acts 10 is the apostle Peter. Yes, *that* Peter. The fisherman who first met Jesus when he cast his net on the other side of the boat and a miracle occurred. The proclaimed Jesus as Lord, and Jesus said, “On this Rock I will build my church.” The guy who didn’t want Jesus to wash his feet, but said he was all in with

the kingdom of God. At least until he denied Jesus three times. Peter got to experience another miracle catch after Jesus' resurrection, and tell Jesus that he loved him: three times. This is the same Peter who preached to the crowds on the day of Pentecost and helped bring three thousand people to faith in the resurrected Christ. Peter was indisputably a faithful Jew, a believer in Jesus Christ, the leader of the apostles, and at the center of the new church. Why would Peter need to be converted?

If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to turn to Acts Chapter 10. My study Bible chapter heading says "Peter and Cornelius." You heard only a few verses of this story this morning; if you don't know who Cornelius is, or haven't heard about him for a while, I encourage you to read all of Acts 10. Here's a summary: Cornelius was a Roman soldier -- a centurion, which meant he had command of 100 men -- a Roman officer. He was also a devout believer in God who prayed constantly and gave generously. One afternoon while Cornelius was praying, he heard God call him by name, and God tells him to send men to Joppa to visit a man named Peter, who was staying with Simon the Tanner. The next day, Cornelius sends three servants to find Peter, and while they're on their way to Joppa, traveling to find Peter, Peter goes up on the roof to pray and has a vision. While Peter is trying to figure out this vision, the servants arrive, and the Spirit tells Peter, there are three guys here looking for you. Go down and meet them right away, because I sent them. See how complicated communication was before there were smart phones? God and the Spirit orchestrated this whole thing.

Cornelius' servants spend the night with Peter at Simon's house, and the next day they all go back to Caesarea to see Cornelius. Cornelius and Peter have this conversation about this crazy thing that happened when they were praying (You too? God spoke to me the very next day!) and Peter realizes the significance of the vision he had. That's where we jumped into the story this morning:

Peter's vision was of the heavens opening and large cloth being lowered down filled with four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds, and God's voice saying "Get up, kill and eat." And Peter replies, "Absolutely not! Some of these animals are unclean, and I've never broken Jewish law and eaten something unclean." And God says,

“What I have made clean you must not call profane.” No wonder Peter was puzzled at the time. But when Peter sees Cornelius he finally gets it: this vision isn’t about *food*, it’s about *people*.

Peter has had his world view shaped by and lived his entire life in a community that’s divided into Us and Them: Us being Jews and Them being everyone else. Peter has lived his life as a faithful Jew: following the law, which means, among other things, eating only certain foods which have been prepared in a particular way. I can relate to Peter, although I may have different categories for Us and Them -- Democrats/ Republicans, Brethren/non-Brethren, IU/Purdue -- you name it, I have my own ways of sorting people and how much and what kind of diversity I am willing to tolerate. And like Peter, I can justify a lot of what I do and whom I accept by what values are important to me. But here is what makes the story of Peter exceptional: Peter has this light bulb moment when he’s talking to Cornelius and the non-Jews who have gathered with him. Here’s what the Spirit was trying to communicate to Peter: God doesn’t have the same categories of Us and Them that we do. When Peter goes to see Cornelius, he says, “It is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean, so when I was sent for, I came without objection.”

That is an amazing statement. To say, I’ve always been taught *this*, but God showed me another way, so I’m going to change. That is Peter’s conversion experience. He has been a faithful, if sometimes flawed, follower of Jesus. He is still a faithful follower of Jesus, but with the vision and power of the Spirit, he’s able to proclaim to the gathered Gentiles that God is not only for Us, the Jews, God is for people of any nation who fear God and do what is acceptable to God. It’s difficult for us to understand what a radical transformation this is, and how profoundly it affected the trajectory of Christianity. The next few chapters of Acts, culminating with the council of Jerusalem in chapter 15, are about the turmoil this statement created in the early church -- the debate it caused and the way it was finally resolved. Change was not easy, even 2000 years ago. Church leaders have always had passionate convictions about who’s in and who’s out.

The promise of possibility always carries the threat of change -- we don’t get one without the other. Some of you may remember me

talking about Appreciative Inquiry two weeks ago, and sharing this logo. [Slide Speak Possibility logo] Last week you waved scarves when we mentioned the Spirit and possibility. This was a sneaky thing for me to ask you to do. Maybe you would have been so excited about possibility if you knew what was coming today. I believe that possibility is something to celebrate. I believe when we pray and are open to God's vision, as Cornelius and Peter were, possibility is a gift from God. But it is a gift with consequences. Notice that change is part of this group of words around possibility. Do you see it? Appreciative Inquiry is a method which asks questions in order to determine what is working in an organization, and how to make it work even better. This assumes that change is going to happen, because if we keep doing what we've done, we'll keep getting what we have. Here are some assumptions from Appreciative Inquiry: In every organization, there are things which are working. Change is less difficult when we bring some of our past with us into the future. We should bring the best parts of our past with us.

Maybe this seems obvious to you -- you may be more enlightened than I am. But I have seen too many relationships and organizations swamped by the hurts and grievances and mistrust that we bring from the past. I've been in the middle of some of those relationships and organizations. It isn't that we don't want to change, it's that we haven't taken the time to identify what was *working*. We either try to stay in and hope we can change everything, or walk away because we have lost sight of what brought us together in the first place. If we are going to speak possibility, we have to be willing to include the possibility that things could change. Because, brothers and sisters, things are going to change whether we include that possibility or not. I suggest that part of our vision should be to identify the best parts of our past which we can bring with us.

Let's go back to Peter and Cornelius. The radical realization that Peter has is that the best part of his Jewish faith tradition is the fear -- that is respect -- of God and doing what is acceptable to God. The message of the Spirit of God is that Jesus Christ is Lord of all; that Christ was put to death on a cross and God raised him on the third day. That is the best of our past that we have to bring forward. That is the message which we have been given to preach to the ends of the earth. How we do that, and whom we commission and empower to

lead us, can -- and probably should -- change. Remember, the amazement of Pentecost was that each person heard the message in their own language -- not that everyone was suddenly speaking the same language. The Spirit does not make us all the same; the Spirit did not make everyone Jewish, because that would cause less dissention in the church. The Spirit allowed Peter, a faithful Jew, to accept Cornelius, a faithful Roman, as a brother in Christ. I can't say which would have been the greater miracle, but I'm glad the Spirit worked the way it did. You didn't become a Christian so you could be like me; I'm not a Christian so I can be like you -- we are Christians because we want to be like Jesus Christ, who died for Us. And died for Them, too. That is the Spirit which sets us free to follow where God is leading.

We will be offering anointing as we sing our final hymn. The oil which is placed on your forehead in the sign of the cross is a prayer for Holy Spirit to rest upon you for healing of mind, body, and spirit, for the confession of sin, for the strengthening of your faith. Thank you for your willingness to receive the possibilities the Spirit has for you. If you would like to be anointed, please come forward while we sing; you may also stay where you are and pray for the possibilities God has for you, your brother and sisters in Christ, and for our congregation.