

Everyone Who Believes

Acts 10:34-43

You have heard the Scripture for today, but I think a little back story might help us to understand Peter's message to Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. Because of his faithfulness, he was visited by an angel who told him to send for Simon called Peter to hear what he had to say.

One day while praying up on the roof, a hungry Peter was surprised to have a vision of a sheet descending from above filled with unclean animals and hearing God telling him to kill and eat. This happened three times, before Peter seemed to catch on that God was trying to tell him something important. Shortly after this vision, Peter hears that there are men at the door who want him to come to Caesarea to speak to the Gentile Cornelius. Now Peter, an apostle of Jesus, was a devout Jew. Jews did not regularly mix with Gentiles, even after Jesus' resurrection.

With God's message fresh in his mind, Peter sets off with some of his friends from Joppa to the home of Cornelius. Peter may have been a bit surprised to find that Cornelius had been instructed to ask for him specifically, and then to find that he would be speaking not only to Cornelius, but his entire household and invited guests. This brings us to today's reading.

Peter begins with an admission of new learning: “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.” Peter acknowledges the study that Cornelius has undertaken by stating that he knows about Jesus and the message he brought following his baptism by John the Baptist.

Then Peter goes on to state that even more than learning second-hand about Jesus, he and his fellow travelers were actual witnesses to Jesus’ ministry. They witnessed his death and saw him following his resurrection. Stating that not everyone saw Jesus, only those selected by God to witness such an amazing sight. Not only did the apostles see Jesus, but they were also able to eat and drink with him following his miraculous resurrection.

Peter recounts Jesus’ commission to preach to the people, not just Jews, but all people, and to testify that Jesus is appointed by God to judge the living and the dead. But even more than Peter’s own first-person accounts, he relates that all the prophets had testified that Jesus is the one through whom all who believe in him will receive forgiveness of sins. Again, not just Jews, but all people everywhere.

I think it is important for us to understand that this was not an easy speech for Peter to make. His vision had challenged all of his deeply held convictions about what was acceptable to God. He understood that it was unlawful for him to associate with Gentiles in any way. It was unlawful for him to eat any of the animals presented to him on the sheet in his vision that God told him to

kill and eat. Then in what may have seemed like an instant, all of his understandings had been turned upside down. It took the vision of Cornelius, Peter's vision on the rooftop, and the power of the Holy Spirit to get Peter to even consider going to meet with Cornelius. Further, it took Cornelius' plea that Peter speak "all that the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Peter had a new understanding, not only about his relationship with Gentiles and how he should treat them, but a new understanding about God and God's relationship to people. Peter repeatedly states in his speech to Cornelius and company that God is impartial, that people in every nation, anyone, can be accepted by God. He continues that Jesus Christ is Lord of not just some, but all people, healing all who are oppressed. And perhaps the icing on the cake, that the prophets had foretold that Jesus was the one in whom everyone who believes will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

Peter had been taught and raised to believe that in this world there was just us and them – Jews and Gentiles, believers and non-believers. His revelation changed his thinking to see that there is an entire family of God, regardless of someone's background. If they express faith in Jesus Christ, they are members of one Holy family. Unfortunately, even centuries later, we are still struggling with the concept that those who believe are brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Throughout the history of the church there have been divisions, that is how we have come to have so many denominations. A quick internet search produced this information:

There are several hundred Christian denominations in the United States alone, and many more worldwide. There are also Non-Denominational / Independent and Interdenominational churches.

That's just Christian denominations. According to a 2022 Pew Research Survey, religion in the US breaks down like this within the entire population:

Religion in the United States (2022 [Pew Research Center](#))

Christian 61 %, Catholic and Protestant

Mormonism 2%

Jewish 2%

Orthodox 1%

Muslim 1%

Buddhist 1%

Other 4%, this includes Hinduism, Wicca, Satanism, Native American religion, Rastafarianism, New Age, Agnosticism, atheism, and humanism and the list goes on.

Many of us, like Peter in his day, have been raised and taught to believe that we are not to associate with anyone outside of our own religious order. This poses a problem when we read Jesus' Great Commission to the disciples:

¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Matthew 28:19-20

Perhaps Peter, after having his vision, was reminded of this commission from His Lord. He was not to limit his witness and neither are we. Who do we come in contact with today that would be our equivalent of Cornelius? When I first came to the Mennonite church, I was stunned to find out that my Mennonite friends would speak of Catholics in a derogatory manner. How many Catholics and Protestants speak unkindly about Jews? Muslims? Hindus? Buddhists?

If we willingly keep ourselves from witnessing to people who are not of our “tribe”, how will everyone come to know and call on the name of Jesus. We have something to offer the world if we open ourselves to see others as God sees them. I know it can be difficult to overcome long held beliefs, to break through how we see and deal with others. Our only hope is to be like Peter, open to the Spirit and to seek a new understanding of the God who “shows no partiality”. May we do the same.

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