

Transformed and Transforming

Cycle #3 – Session #5

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Text: Acts 10

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence.

Song: *Be Thou My Vision* -- #595 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

Come to praise God, faithful people!

Come, for God welcomes us and invites us to draw close.

Praise God, who rules over all the earth.

Praise God, who is as near as our next breath.

Sun, moon, and stars shine in praise of God.

God created them and established for each a place.

God has a place for each of us in this world;

We have come so that God may instruct and equip us.

Mountains and hills, trees and animals praise God.

Let all the rulers of the earth do so as well.

God provides abundantly for our needs.

In Christ we become members of God's one great family.

Welcome One Another. Share briefly with one another one joy and one concern you have had this week.

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Scripture

Acts: 10:1-33

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' ⁴He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' ⁷When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

¹⁷Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three* men are searching for you. ²⁰Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' ²¹So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' ²²They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' ²³So Peter* invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers* from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. ²⁶But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' ²⁷And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that 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. ²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

³⁰Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. ³¹He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." ³³Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

This story is often thought of as being about the conversion of Cornelius, a centurion of an Italian cohort, meaning 1/10 of a Legion or in other words the commander of 100 men. The story may be one of Luke's anachronisms because the Italian cohort was not known to be present in Judea before 69 C.E., which would seem to make it after the time Peter had been put to death in Rome. However, it is one of those stories that whether or not it happened exactly as Luke tells it isn't all that important. It points to an important truth about what happened in the early years of the church. In order to welcome the Gentiles in to it, it couldn't just stay by the shores of the Sea of Galilee. God loves the whole world and all may become the children of God.

Besides being the story of Cornelius, it is perhaps more importantly the story of Peter's continuing transformation from being a fisherman living on the edge of the Sea of Galilee to being the one who could lead the church into a new day. However this happened, it clearly required a huge jump. Even in the Diaspora Jews did not forget that they were Jews and there were communities scattered through the Mediterranean world. They tended to remain in their own enclaves. Even when the first Christians went out into the Mediterranean world they could go to Jewish communities and see Jesus' teachings as being intended to bring transformation to the Jews. They understood themselves to be among "God's chosen people." Early Christians continued the religious practices which were a part of their faith as Jews. They saw Gentiles as being all those who were not Jews.

There were Gentiles who were understood to be God Seekers or God Fearers. Some of these were devout people. Some even went to the temple in Jerusalem, although they could only go into the outer courts. Cornelius is one of those and long before the beginning of this story he had the habit of helping those in need and praying. But even with that, it wouldn't have been easy for Peter to go to his man.

Most of us recognize that patterns with which we grew up are hard to change. The song from **South Pacific** which was written about prejudice, puts it, "*You have to be taught to be afraid, of people whose eyes are oddly made. You've got to be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight. You've got to be carefully taught.*" I grew up in a community in which there were a few African Americans and some Mexicans. That there weren't many of either group is really only a guess on my part, because I knew almost nothing of either group. I'd like to think that the integration of the schools which had happened in the 30's took place because the people of my

town were very open and forward looking. The reality is not so grand. During the depression years, they'd simply been unable to maintain separate schools. By the time I went to school, it was too late to turn the clock back, which of course was a good thing. However, the fact that the schools were integrated didn't mean there were not very clear rules of conduct. We all knew what they were and there were not many who dared break them. We understood them, even if we couldn't verbalize them. I was in college before I realized what the rules were and how stupid they'd been. I also recognized they didn't have to govern my life or the lives of my children.

Just how binding the Jewish food laws were may be hard for us to grasp. My father-in-law who was a missionary in what is now the Republic of Congo was a missionary there from the late 30's to the mid 50's. He tells the story of a boy in the boarding school whose grandmother had put a curse on him, saying that if he ever ate the meat of an electric fish (eel) he would die. At the boarding school whatever fish was caught was put into the food pot and cooked to feed all the children. This boy ate what he was given and for several days, he was fine, until someone mentioned that there had been electric fish in the stew. Within hours the boy was dead, for no apparent reason other than the strength of the curse.

The rules by which Peter lived as a Jew were not that stringent, but they were certainly embedded in him and indeed in the whole Jewish Christian community. He would not have willingly gone against the food laws or eaten anything which was in the category of unclean. He also would not have associated with anyone who fell outside the approved circle. Had those attitudes continued to prevail, Christianity would probably never have gotten loose in the world and would have remained as it had begun, a 1st and perhaps even a 2nd century Jewish sect. Clearly God had other plans and as Luke tells the story, Peter was the instrument by which those plans began to be implemented. The tradition which says that Peter died in Rome appears to be accurate, so clearly he had moved out into a larger world.

The two places named in the story are important. Joppa or in modern times, Jaffa, was a cosmopolitan city located on the Mediterranean coast near Tel Aviv. The Holy Spirit had come upon the disciples in Jerusalem, but following that, they went out to other places. Peter was already entering the wider world. Cornelius was in Caesarea, named for the emperor and the seat of the Roman government in Judea. As Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish faith, Caesarea pointed to the wider world. While the Holy Spirit had baptized the disciples in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit baptized the gentiles in Caesarea which represented the Roman or Gentile world.

This story takes place before there is a deep divide between the Jews and the Christians. The persecution of the Christians by the Romans had not yet started or if it had, at this point it was not all that serious or extensive. In that sense the events in this account occurred at a relatively peaceful moment in what was to become a tumultuous period of history.

Observation

If this were to be made into a play, I think there would be two scenes, happening side by side and separated only by a thin wall. On one side we would see Cornelius. We know that as a *God fearer*, a Gentile who was one among others gathered around the synagogue community, as such would have been generally supportive of the Jews. Most God fearers did not convert and so didn't adopt the food laws and the men were not circumcised. On the other side of this thin partition, we would see Peter going up to the roof to pray. We would know that God had heard Cornelius and is about to bring Peter into this story.

Consider

Have you experienced events in your own life which seemed to be happening in isolation and then at some point you discover those events were really a piece of a larger picture? That what had seemed like mere coincidence had importance beyond what you first knew? Someone has said these kinds of coincidences are the Holy Spirit's play. God had touched Cornelius' life in ways that prepared him to hear the Good News. At the same time Peter was being prepared to go to Cornelius and to step even further outside the old boundaries. Where have you seen God acting in your life?

Observation

In the story before this one, we are told about Tabitha or Dorcas, a widow who did many good works and acts of charity, but who had become ill and died. Peter had gone to her and was the means of her healing. That story is not unlike some of the healing stories of Jesus, but it is a reminder of both the power of God and the great demands that were being made on Peter. After those events he had gone to the home of Simon the tanner. While the tanner's trade wasn't religiously defiling, it was certainly unsavory and most Jews would not have accepted Simon's hospitality. This is the place offered Peter, a place for rest, for prayer and for preparing for the next events of his ministry in which he was asked to go to the home of a gentile. Going to Simon's home is a little like the halfway place. It isn't where he used to be... nor is it yet where he will be.

Consider

Are there events in your own life at which you can look back and see as having prepared you for the future? Are there things which have carried you beyond your "comfort zone" and allowed you to discover new places in which you met God and which broadened your "comfort zone" on the way to yet other challenges? How willing are you to step out of your "comfort zone?" Does it take an act of God?

Observation

Dreams or visions were understood throughout the scripture to be a common way in which God communicated with human beings. Many of the houses in India are still made after the ancient design of Asia and the Middle East. Because houses were often built rather close together and usually had a central courtyard where the hustle and

bustle of a household took place, finding a place apart, wouldn't necessarily have been easy. Roof tops were flat and often even had stairs leading to them. People might gather to converse with each other, or someone might go to be alone and pray, particularly at certain times of the day when most people would have been involved in carrying on the tasks of daily life. It may be that some sort of shelter had been erected to provide shade for those who went there and while it is no great distance from anywhere, it offers a place apart. The time of the day was perhaps a bit unusual, especially if the weather was warm or there was no shelter, but the time reported may have been a way of indicating that Peter in the midst of the *busy-ness* of daily life, felt some urgency to go apart for prayer and meditation.

Consider

In order to hear anything God might wish Peter to hear, he had to be out of the mainstream of life around him. Where do you go when you need time alone? How do you become quiet enough to listen?

Observation

Our story says that Peter became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while he was waiting he slips into a trance. The vision which he has is a dramatic one of a large sheet, being lowered in front of him. The contents were such that no good Jew, no matter how hungry he was, would consider eating. A voice from heaven, perhaps reminiscent of the voice which had spoken to Jesus at his baptism, tells Peter not only to kill these "unclean" creatures, but to eat them. No self respecting Jew would have killed an animal. According to religious practice that would have made him unclean. Jewish food laws were among the things which separated the Jewish people from their neighbors. Even those who might have been less careful about other things obeyed the food laws. During times of captivity and exile, Jews had been willing to die rather than break these laws. Peter's response is what might be expected, "I've never eaten anything like this. It is unholy and unclean." The second time he hears the voice say, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" By the third time this happens apparently Peter was beginning to get the idea.

Consider

As people who have few rules in our religious practice, it may be difficult to understand people for whom rules, which set them apart as God's people, were never to be broken. To do so would be to separate oneself from God. Is there anything in your own life which can help you to understand their attitude and look at Peter with sympathy and understanding? If God were to come to you in a dream what might you be shown about your own life and times which would require major transformation?

Observation

When Peter argues with God about being told to eat things he understood to be unclean, he was not being childish, nor was it just prejudice or petty. He had been taught that the revealed word of God is the most sacred word and that even though God

sometimes came to people in dreams and visions, those dreams and visions might be faulty. Rather than being from God, they might in fact lead the devout follower astray. His responding to the vision with doubt may not be too surprising. Dreams must always be interpreted. When interpretation is occurring the danger is what one sees and understands is what one wants to see and understand. The interpretation must be tried and tested in order to be sure it is in fact of God.

In this place there is a clear difference in the world between the first and 21st century. For the most part we do not hold religious practices or rituals to be of supreme importance.

A wedding for example does not have to be done precisely according to the rules because we see so many of the rules were determined by human beings and not by God. We may see the relationship between two persons as being sacred and therefore to be blessed by God, but the words that are said, the place a wedding is held, all of the rituals may be things we like and therefore continue to do, but they are not law. There are foods we may wish to eat and others that we wouldn't consider eating, but it isn't because of a religious belief. Our tastes are a result of our culture, the homes in which we were raised, the food which is available.

Consider

For Peter, even given the time he spent with Jesus, moving from the rules by which his life has been governed to understanding that Gentiles were to be welcomed was an enormous change. Jesus had taught the Sabbath was made for humans and not the other way around. He had also stressed God's law is to be in our hearts and lived in our lives, rather than being rituals or religious practices. But even with that experience, to confront the possibility of eating unapproved food or welcoming people who were seen as being separate from the People of God, was an enormous challenge. Imagine how you might have felt in Peter's place.

Observation

God's word to Peter is "*Do not call anything I have made, unclean.*" In many ways this scene is the opening of a door. The post-Easter church is on its way to becoming a very different kind of religious community. Perhaps Peter left the rooftop to go down to lunch still very puzzled by his dream. Lunch would have been safe enough. He was eating with a Jewish family. I suspect it was only when the delegation from Cornelius arrived that the pieces fell into place and Peter recognized that it was in fact God's intention that he should go to Cornelius, a gentile, and tell him the story of God's salvation and teach him what it meant to be a follower.

This story is one of God through the Holy Spirit guiding the church into a new day. So long as it was dressed in its Jewish robes it could not travel the world to the ends of the earth. Luke, as a gentile and a Christian, understood perhaps better than some of the first followers did, that God's love is for everyone.

Consider

Isn't this still the challenge to the church? We know on the one hand that God loves all of us and that love is unlimited. On the other hand, how easily do we move outside the doors of our churches? How readily are we able to welcome people who are not like us? What gifts may God have for us that we cannot see or which we may see, but do not want to change in order to welcome others? Where do you see the Holy Spirit's guidance now?

Activity (Optional)

Spend some time planning to visit another culture. You do not know for sure what you will encounter. What things will you want to take with you because it would be very difficult to do without them? How will you go about learning about the culture? What foods, particularly meats might you find difficult to eat if it were served to you? As you look at your church and the fact that we are moving into a very different cultural view than the one we know, what will we need to know about other people in the community? How might people be drawn into the circle of faith when they come from very different places and do not dress or look or act like we do?

Practicing the Presence

Scripture Acts 10

In your prayer journey this week, in addition to the study of scripture, look around and see if there is anything in your everyday life, either at work or at home, in your neighborhood, which seems to invite you to change and see God at work in wider areas than you've considered before. What opportunities might there be for you to widen your experience of God in others?

Another prayer from *Celtic Prayers* which invites us to see God's presence in the most ordinary things and recognize the goodness of God as being all around them.

My little oratory gives me greater
delight than the finest mansion. From
it I can watch the sun and the moon
move across the sky, and stars
gather like soldiers to guard me at night.

Who made it? God made it. He
planted the seed that grew into this
mighty tree. And, where the boughs
rise out of the trunk, he fashioned a
hollow where I can sit.

Who protects me? God protects me.

He put branches and leaves above me
to shield me from rain. And he put me
high above the ground, safe from the
spears and swords of robbers. p. 18

The scripture focus for the coming week is Romans 12

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read, “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” portions. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you - Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote this sonnet for her husband, but it is one of those things which might as easily be applied to loving God. It is God’s love for us and our love in return that will help us move beyond old ways, old prejudices and broaden our world to make room for all of God’s people and all that God has created.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another.

Response (Unison)

**Guardian of our lives
Pour into the empty cups of the world
The beauty and blessings of Christ.
May you who labored in love to create all life
Continue creating within us new vision and new life.**

Holy Island Prayer Book, p. 113

Blessing

**Kindle in our hearts, O God
The flame of that love which never ceases,
That it may burn in our lives
Till we shine forever in your presence.**

Holy Island Prayer Book, p. 114, adapted

Song: Lo, I Am with You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal