

Easter 6B - Cornelius
Acts 10-11

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Background on Acts 10-11:

In the first couple of years following Jesus' resurrection, the entire church community was Jewish and Jesus was understood to be the messiah of the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham. At this point, Jews and Jewish Christians did not associate with Gentiles, although there were Gentiles called "God-fearers" who respected Jewish teachings. In this story, the church begins to discern that God has a new truth to reveal to them, that Jesus is the messiah of all people on earth.

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One 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.' He 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. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When 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, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

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

Now 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. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' They 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.' So 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. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and 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. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius 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. He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." Therefore 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.'

Then Peter began to speak to them: '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. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

Have you ever had the experience of discovering something that was hidden in plain sight? It might be a little park that you have driven past for years without going in, but then someone invited you to walk with them there and it is now one of your favorite spots. Or maybe it was a small restaurant that didn't look like much on the outside and so you never bothered to try it, but when a friend invited you there for dinner you found it to be magnificent and now you eat there quite frequently.

This long story about Peter and Cornelius is kind of like that for me. Every Easter Sunday we read ten verses from this story, so I have always been well aware of the basic story of Cornelius, the Roman soldier, becoming a follower of Jesus. But three years ago, when my Tuesday morning class spent a couple of months going through the entire book of Acts, this story came alive to me in a new way and it transformed my understanding of our Easter greeting, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

The lectionary calls for us to read just a snippet of the story of Peter and Cornelius today, five verses from a story that is 66 verses long. But because of the transforming effect this story has had on me in recent years, I wanted you to encounter the whole story, and so I took the liberty to omit a few other parts of the service so that we could make time to hear this story in its entirety.

Let me begin by giving you a little background about the book of Acts and the controversial issue of the Gentiles that this story addresses.

The book of Acts, which is a short-hand way of referring to “The Acts of the Apostles”, is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. The same person wrote both Luke and Acts and, though he never identifies himself, tradition holds that the author was Luke, a physician by trade who traveled for a time with the apostle Paul. Scholars believe the book was written around 80-85, or about 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Acts was written to tell the story of the early Christian community following Jesus’ resurrection, beginning in Jerusalem and tracing its expansion to Rome. It asserts that the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the continuation of the actions of God begun in Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David and the whole people of Israel.

In the church today, Christians sometimes ask the question, “Will the Jews be saved, since they do not acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah?” That is not the question Luke addresses in Acts. Acts assumes that God is faithful to the promises made to the descendants of Abraham. Every act of God since Abraham, including the gifts of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, demonstrates God’s fidelity to those promises.

The question Luke and his audience wrestle with is, “Will the Gentiles be saved? Can they be part of the Christian community?” (Gentile is the term for everyone who is not Jewish). The descendants of Abraham were always a minority and one way of protecting their identity was to set boundaries of who was in and who was out. One way they did this was by limiting who you ate meals with. Jews could talk with Gentiles and do business with them, but having table fellowship was not allowed. Eating a meal with another implies acceptance and equality. Gentiles were allowed only in the outer most courtyard of the Temple. Since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in the 5th century B.C., there was a significant portion of the Jewish community that held that Jews should not marry Gentiles and that God’s promises to Abraham were only for Abraham’s direct descendents.

Almost 20 centuries later, living in a country which prides itself on being a melting pot of peoples, it may be hard for us Gentiles to understand what was the big deal about eating meals together and what a radical shift was involved for the church to discern that Jesus was the messiah not only for the descendants of Abraham, but for everyone. We Gentile Christians tend to think of ourselves as insiders since our families have been part of the church for so many generations, but we are not insiders. We Gentile Christians have always been and always will be outsiders to the promises made to the people of Israel, and the story of Peter and Cornelius tells the story of how God led the church to understand that Jesus is the messiah of all people, including you and me, even though there are portions of the Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, that clearly state that Gentiles are not included in the promises of God.

Luke gives us a table of contents of sorts in the opening chapter of Acts. The risen Jesus tells the disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Luke then portrays the growth of the church as a series of concentric circles, beginning in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, then to the surrounding Judean countryside. Next Philip brings the gospel to the Jewish cousins, the Samaritans, and, in the passage we read last week, a court official from Ethiopia. Then a persecutor of the church, Paul, becomes a follower of Jesus. And then we come to this story of Peter and Cornelius. This is the longest narrative in the book of Acts, given greater attention than any other story, so from a literary standpoint we might surmise that this is the most important part of the book, a turning point in God’s drama of redemption.

The story of Cornelius and Peter is a story of repentance and conversion, but it is important that we all understand what we mean by the terms “repentance” and “conversion”. Many assume that repentance is something that we do – when I repent, I feel sorry for my sins. Many think of conversion as a one-time human decision to give one’s life to Christ or accept Jesus as one’s personal savior. Set those definitions of repentance and conversion aside, for the terms have another meaning in this story.

This story is sometimes called “the conversion of Cornelius,” but nowhere in the story does Cornelius repent of his sins or publicly accept Jesus as his savior. The story might be called “the conversion of Peter,” but it is not Peter’s own theological reflection and insight that lead him to the realization that Jesus is the messiah of the Gentiles also. Peter receives an external word in a vision that helps him understand a new aspect of God’s truth. These conversions are not about repenting of sin, but having one’s eyes opened to seeing that God is acting in the world in a new way.

This is also true of the third conversion in this story -- “the conversion of the church.” It is this conversion I had not really noticed until three years ago. The entire church community listens to Peter’s story about how Cornelius the outsider had approached him and asked to be accepted into the church community. Peter was very skeptical of Cornelius. He knew scripture and tradition very well and took it seriously. Gentiles were not to be associated with. Yet when Peter witnessed evidence of the Holy Spirit in Cornelius and the other Gentiles, he repented; he converted; he changed his mind about the Gentiles. He was criticized for this by the church in Jerusalem, all of whom were Jewish followers of Jesus. So Peter went to Jerusalem and told about his experience with Cornelius and the other Gentiles, and explained that his experience with them had caused him to see that God was acting in a new way. Yes, he agreed, accepting the Gentiles contradicted the clear teaching of their scriptures and tradition, but if God had given these Gentiles the same gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, how could he say “no” to them and thereby hinder God?

After Peter shared his experience, Luke says the church was silenced (this is my favorite part of the story – whether the silence lasted 10 seconds or 10 minutes or 10 days we are not told—I assume it took a fairly long period of time for them to digest this radical new way of looking at the Gentiles). After this period of silence the church community praises God saying, “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Now it is important to recognize that not everyone in the church community agrees with welcoming the Gentiles at this point. We know from the rest of the book of Acts and from Paul’s letters that this issue was not settled all at once. For decades the church continues to wrestle with the issue of whether a Gentile must follow the Jewish law in order to be a Christian. This shows us that conversion is not a once-and-done experience, but is an ongoing process over months and years and lifetimes. It shows us that conversion is not just an individual experience, but that the entire church community experiences repentance and conversion.

Notice that repentance does not begin with us, but is God’s gift that enables a person or community to be turned toward truth. Turning toward the truth about myself and my situation is quite beyond my power to accomplish. Like Cornelius and Peter, we cannot repent, turn around, on our own. God does it for us. The gospel good news is that God gives us repentance, an act of grace. Martin Luther states this good news in the *Small Catechism*. Take a hymnal and turn to page 1162 way at the back. You may have not yet discovered that the entire *Small Catechism* is included in this hymnal. Look at the last paragraph on page 1162, Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Notice that the verbs describing the Holy Spirit's actions in the church are all present tense. We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit continues to convert the church today, leading it to repent and turn toward the truth.

As I said at the beginning, this story has been working on me for the past three years. I ask myself, what might God be up to in this text? What is the significance of this story for the church today? I invite you to live with this story in the coming week. Read it again a time or two. Meditate on it. If Christ is indeed risen, as we proclaimed at the beginning of worship, if Christ is alive and among us, then we have to be open to the possibility that he is still teaching us and taking us places we never expected to go. Where might the risen Christ be leading us today? Are there people today that the church views as outsiders, people who the church has long perceived as being outside the promises of God, on whose behalf the Holy Spirit is working on us to repent, to turn to the truth that God wants us to see – that there is a place for them at God's table?

May God give the church wisdom and humility as we discern the answer to that question anew in each generation.