

YOU, TOO
Acts 10

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The psychiatrist Robert Coles liked to tell the story of a little girl named Ruby whom he met during the early days of desegregation. Coles became intrigued by the seven-year-old, who had to be escorted to school by federal marshals. She would get out of the car and be met by jeering mobs who shouted racial epithets at her. She would pause, bow her head for a moment, and then walk into the school, staring straight ahead. He got to know Ruby's family and finally felt comfortable asking Ruby why she always paused before she went into class. She said, "I'm saying a little prayer. I'm saying, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" This little girl had access to a religious story and tradition, and it gave her great strength. (Marilyn Berlin Snell, "Interview with Elstain: Turn Down the Volume, *Utne Reader* 95, Nov/Dec 1995, p. 71, www.homileticsonline.com)

I'm going to tell you a story today from the Acts of the Apostles that's not nearly as familiar as some of the other stories of the New Testament. It doesn't have the familiarity of the story of the Prodigal Son. It's not often repeated in children's Sunday School rooms like Zaccheus – the little man up the tree. And while most anyone can tell you the story about the woman caught in adultery and Jesus saying, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," I doubt many of you could stand up and rattle off the lines of Peter and Cornelius.

I. It's a story against prejudice.

There is a story told of C. S. Lewis as a small boy – about six or seven. One day he announced to his father, "Daddy, I have a prejudice against the French."

"Why?" asked his father, not unreasonably.

"If I knew that," replied the precocious youngster triumphantly, "it wouldn't be a prejudice."

He was quite right, of course. The point about a prejudice is that it's what you have when you are "pre-judging" a case: making your mind up before you know the facts. (N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, p. 162)

Many Jews would tell stories about the wicked things Gentiles did. One of the reasons Jews gave for not going into Gentile houses and eating with them is that the houses were polluted because the Gentiles forced their womenfolk to have abortions and then put the dead fetuses down the drains or under the floorboards. In the same sort of way, some Gentiles were taught that Jews

were stuck-up, unsociable people, because they wouldn't eat pork (which was the cheapest meat available in most places), because they insisted on having a day off work each week, and because they wouldn't join in with normal social activities, like the parties which went on around pagan temples and the great games which celebrated the gods, or sometimes the emperors. Some even said that Jews robbed the pagan temples because they didn't believe the pagan divinities were real.

In Acts 10, Peter has to lose his prejudice.

In Acts 1:8, we have the programmatic passage for this book. "Tell the Good News, beginning in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the remotest part of the earth."

With the Day of Pentecost, we saw the gospel in Jerusalem (Acts 2). Then we saw the gospel in Samaria (Acts 8). Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans who were experiencing a revival before they received the Holy Spirit. God designed it this way so Peter and John could see that these half-breed Jews were, indeed, partakers of the promises of God.

We've seen the Ethiopian who (chapter 8) called for the chariot to stop so that he could be baptized in the pool of water.

But this time, it's even a despised Roman who is included in the story of Jesus.

The place was Caesarea. The time was somewhere around the middle of the first century. It was an ordinary day, or so it seemed, until it becomes life-changing for Cornelius.

Cornelius was a Roman soldier. I know what you're thinking – he was the bad guy, the villain. But not Cornelius. He was different. It's true that he was a member of the Roman army, which was the occupational army over the people of God. In fact, he was what we'd call a captain today. He was over 100 men. He was stationed in the city of Caesarea – in the coastal plains of Sharon in northern Palestine, on the shores of the Mediterranean – about 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem. The city, Caesarea, was named in honor of Caesar Augustus, adopted heir of Julius Caesar. Herod the Great, that evil king who had all the infants slain at the birth of Jesus, had made Caesarea into a great harbor, renamed the city for Caesar Augustus, and created Caesarea into the Roman capital of the province of Judea.

It's a good guess that Cornelius, as a centurion, was over the archers who were to protect the fresh water supply at Caesarea.

This was one Roman soldier with a sincere and a pure heart. He feared and revered the God of the Jews. To be sure, he wasn't Jewish. He was a Gentile, but he had seen how bankrupt paganism really was – with all of its little gods and meaningless rituals. He had become interested in the Jewish God, the one God, the Creator, the giver of the law. He prayed to the Jewish God. He was even respected by a lot of Jews.

He did not know a lot about God, but he knew that He must be the true, supreme being. In fact, he lived out his faith in a real way. We are told that he was generous in giving alms and money to further God's kingdom. A noble and spiritually sensitive Roman army officer, he was the Gentile

that “stretched out his hands, longing for the other shore,” longing to have a relationship with the God of the Jews.

Unfortunately, the Jews had taken their blessing and made it a point of privilege. When God chose Israel to bless one family, the family of Abraham, He really intended to bless all the families of the earth. So the psalmist and the prophets foretold a day when God’s Messiah would inherit the nations, the Lord’s servant would be their light, and all nations would flow into the Lord’s House. God would pour out His Spirit on all humankind.

The tragedy was that Israel had twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, become filled with racial pride and hatred. They despised the Gentiles as dogs and developed traditions which kept them apart. No Orthodox Jew would even enter the house of a Gentile, much less invite him into his home.

Before Gentiles could become part of the church, a church that found its birth in Jewish roots, this extreme racial prejudice had to be overcome.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon – a time of prayer among the Jews. Suddenly Cornelius had a vision of an angel of God – an angel of God had come to him, an unworthy Gentile. The angel, in fact, knew his name: Cornelius.

It was a terrifying moment. Yes, he wanted to have a relationship with God, but he’d never dreamed it would happen this way. His heart was pounding. His eyes grew to the size of saucers. All he could do was stare.

Cornelius might have explained it this way:

What was I to do? There I stood, with my eyes fixed upon the angel, the angel who had called me by my name. And somehow I muttered, ever so weakly, “What is it Lord?” I had been praying to God a lot, but just like you, I never imagined that God would speak back to me – at least not this way. The angel answered, “Cornelius, your prayers to God and your offerings have ascended as a memorial before God.”

Then the Lord gave me some very specific instructions. “Send some of your men to Joppa and send for a man named Peter. He is staying at the house of Simon, a leather-worker, whose house is located by the sea.”

I didn’t know who Peter was. I didn’t know who this Simon was, either. I didn’t know why the Lord wanted me to go to Joppa to find Peter, but if you ever have the good fortune to be commanded by God’s angel to do something, you will understand my response. You just do it. Whatever this magnificent creature might ask of me, I was ready to act now and ask questions later.

When God calls, be ready to respond. Sometimes what He asks you to do may seem an odd request, but obedience in faith is the only trusting response. Selected obedience is not obedience at all. It’s convenience.

So I summoned two of my household servants, trusted men, and one of my best soldiers, explained to them that they were to go to the city of Joppa, to Simon's house near the sea, and seek a fellow by the name of Peter. Even as my men were approaching the city of Joppa, Peter went upon the rooftop of Simon's house looking for solitude and shade under the awning, a cooling breeze from the sea. He became hungry. It went something like this:

I, Peter, was praying, and as I was praying I became hungry. My host was having the food prepared, and I fell into a trance and saw a vision, a dream. It was strange, as dreams so often are. Bizarre in some sense.

I saw the sky open up, and a great sheet was coming down. It was being laid down by its four corners to the ground. In that sheet were all kinds of animals – a camel, a crocodile, a rabbit, a pig, a lizard, an eagle, an ostrich, and an owl. A buzzard, a bat, a stork, a mouse, and a chameleon. All animals that are considered unclean. All animals that, as religious people, we had been taught not even to touch much less to eat.

But there it was, a sheet – something like a flying carpet – descending to earth, with all these filthy animals. What could this possibly mean.

If it were not enough that I had to see this zoo with the dirty dozen before me, the voice that I heard made things all the worse. “Get up, Peter. Kill these animals and eat them.” Of course, you know what I, a law-abiding Jew, said. “No way, Lord, for I've always followed your dietary restrictions in the book of Moses. I'm hungry, but I'm not hungry enough to eat these filthy animals.”

And the voice gave the command a second time. “What God has called clean, no longer consider it unclean.” This happened yet a third time.

And suddenly the sheet and all the animals were taken back into the sky. There I sat, wondering what could this possibly mean. Me, a Jew, being commanded by the Lord no longer to consider as unclean what He declares as clean. There I sat, perplexed, and by now my appetite, my hunger was gone. If you'd been told to eat a lizard, your appetite would leave you as well.

There I was, pondering, when I heard some men coming to the gate. And they were shouting, “Is a man called Peter staying here?” Again, the Spirit spoke to me. “Peter, go with these men without fear, for I, Myself, have sent them for you.” I left the roof and hurried to meet these men who had been sent by the Spirit.

“I am Peter. I am he. I'm the one.”

These men explained that a centurion by the name of Cornelius, a man who loved God, was told by God to come for me that I might preach at his house. Of course, I would have thought them crazy had not the Spirit already confirmed His approval.

They spent the night with Simon the tanner. Early the next morning we woke, and I took some friends from Joppa as we made our way to Caesarea, a thirty mile walk. Cornelius was expecting us. He told everyone about his vision. Some thought he had been in the heat too long or was losing his mind, but many came. Many were curious.

As he saw me, Cornelius fell at my feet and began to worship me. I quickly put a stop to this. "Cornelius, I'm just a man like you. Get up. Get up." I knew it was against the law of God to talk to these foreigners, these Gentiles. But I could not get the vision of the sheet of animals and the word of God, "Don't call anything unclean that God has cleansed," out of my mind.

And I began for the first time to understand the vision that God had sent me. He wasn't talking about pigs. He was talking about people. I should not call any man unholy or unclean or unfit for God's love and for His Kingdom.

"So I'm here, but why did you send for me?" Cornelius explained that four days ago an angel in shining clothes sat before him and told him to go and to get me. So I began to preach the good news of God's acting in history through His Son, Jesus Christ. My sermon went something like this:

"Now I realize that God does not show favoritism based on nationality. God accepts people from every nation who fear him and who do what is right. Surely you have heard what happened, how a man called Jesus was baptized by John. How he was anointed by the Holy Spirit and with the power of God, how He traveled many places doing good works, healing people. He could heal because God was with Him.

"We saw everything that happened to Him in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a cross. But God – God raised Him on the third day, and many saw Him. Everyone did not see Him, but only those whom God chose beforehand to witness such things. Why, some of us even ate and drank with Him after He was resurrected. And He commanded us to preach, to tell everyone that God has appointed Him as the judge of both the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about Him, that all who repent and believe in Him will receive forgiveness for their sins through His name."

Even as I was speaking the words of my sermon, the Holy Spirit came and fell upon all who heard my message. My traveling companions from Joppa could not believe it. How could God, the God of the nation of Israel, pour out His Spirit upon the Gentiles, non-Jews? These Gentiles were praising God, and no one could deny it. Can anyone try to keep these Gentiles from being baptized in the church when they have already been saved, already been baptized by God's Holy Spirit, just as we have?

That was the first time that I realized the good news of the Gospel of God – the death and the resurrection of Jesus – was for everyone, and that I should never treat anyone differently because they are not just like me.

II. The message is for repentance, not tolerance.

As the most outstanding New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says, “it would be all too easy, following precisely our own late-Western, postmodern prejudices, to imagine that the whole episode to do with Cornelius was simply about getting rid of all distinctions and being ‘tolerant’ of everyone. That,” says the esteemed professor, “would be a bad mistake.”

Peter was not saying that God accepts everyone the way they are. The point was Cornelius was God-fearing. The whole point was for Peter to go and call upon Cornelius and his family to accept Jesus. No one wanted Cornelius to stay just the way he was.

Others have even tried to say that this story was about recognizing “that all religions lead to God.” This is nothing like what Luke intended for one to conclude. And Cornelius and Peter, themselves, would be shocked that you would have such a thought.

The whole reason that Cornelius was seeking the God of Israel was that he was fed up with the normal Roman gods and eager to follow what seemed to him to be the real God. God does not accept us simply as we are. He invites us as we are, but responding to that invitation always involves complete transformation, which is acted out in the story of repentance, forgiveness, baptism, and, like this passage, receiving the Spirit.

No, the story is not one of tolerance. The story is one of the Messiahship of Rabbi Jesus. Both Jews and Gentiles need to change and repent. This story humbles Jews because they’ve lost their privileged position and Gentiles because they have to acknowledge the Jewish Messiah.

So there you have it. Everybody is in the same boat. The story of Jesus is available to all. And God is not tolerant of any of our misplaced priorities or philosophies. He calls us to repent and follow the Son He sent, Jesus of Nazareth.

The gospel is for you, too!