

Ben Lattimer
Stone Church of the Brethren
Sermon
May 19, 2019
Acts 10-11
Be Curious

Sermon

Ted Lasso Movie Clip...

Billionaire Rupert Mannion was mean and vindictive. The only thing he ever truly loved was his football club - and Rupert living in England, meant that his football club was actually a soccer team. So when his ex-wife Rebecca won ownership of the team in the divorce settlement she decided to sabotage the team - by hiring an American Football coach - Ted Lasso - to be the new manager. But, as the season goes on, Ted's folksy ways and sincere kindness begin to win people over - including Rebecca whom Rupert continues to antagonize...

"Be curious - not judgmental..."

Peter & Cornelius

Our story this morning represents the longest narrative in the book of Acts at 66 verses. Peter's vision of the sheet with the animals on it gets told – then summarized by Peter to Cornelius, and then retold in its entirety *again* at the beginning of the very next chapter by Peter to the church back in Jerusalem.

My old Bible professor used to say that when a Bible story spends a long time telling and then retelling and then retelling the same thing again, it's a hint from the author – saying: [*whispered loudly*] "Dear reader... This is really important!"

You see this story marks a turning point in the story of the early church. If you'd asked a member of the early church what religion they were, they would have told you. "We're Jews." They were Jewish followers of a Jewish rabbi named Jesus. Christians didn't consider themselves to be part of a new religion. The good news of Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham, the promise to God's chosen people. Everybody in the early church *knew* that the promise was for the Jews. Just the Jews. Everybody *knew* that's how it was supposed to work – except God, apparently...

Play-by-Play

The story opens with this Roman Centurion named Cornelius receiving a vision from God telling him that God has heard his prayers and seen the way he has cared for others around him. And

God tells Cornelius to send messengers to find a man named Simon Peter...

Then the scene cuts to Simon Peter – unaware of this earlier episode. Peter is praying up on the roof when he too has a vision. He's hungry, and he sees heaven opened up and something like a large sheet being lowered down. The sheet is full of animals, and a voice from heaven invites Peter to take and eat...

Here's the catch: The animals are all unclean. See, Peter's a Jew, and the Jews have very specific rules about what is OK and what's not OK to eat. Lamb and beef are fine – but there aren't any sheep or cows on this sheet. Instead it's full of pigs and reptiles, shellfish... Pork is not OK. Snakes are not OK. Shrimp is right out.

So, Peter – being a good Jew – says, no. He's hungry, but he's never eaten anything unclean. He *knows* the rules. Everybody knows the rules. And then the voice says to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.” Three times Peter has this vision.

The meaning of the vision is not immediately apparent to Peter. But then these messengers from Cornelius show up. Peter knows the rules. Knows that good Jews do not associate with Gentiles – they don't visit with Gentiles, don't stay in their homes, don't eat with Gentiles. But he has this vision sort of ringing in his head, and so he goes.

He gets to Cornelius' house and Cornelius tells Peter about his own vision – the angel telling him to send for Peter. Then Cornelius says, “So here we are. God told us to send for you – to listen to what you have to say... So, we're listening...”

Peter tells them the good news. He tells them what he has seen. Tells them about Jesus, about his life, death, and resurrection. He tells them the good news of life and forgiveness.

Then something happens. Something nobody expected. Something that wasn't supposed to happen. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and all those who are listening...

Cornelius is surprised. Peter and his Jewish friends are stunned. They can't believe what they are seeing with their own eyes. Then Peter said, “These people have already been baptized with the Holy Spirit, how can we withhold the water of baptism?”

We're so used to having a church full of Gentiles that we forget how radical this was. It's hard to overstate what a seismic shift this was for the early church.

Everybody knew that the good news was for Jews – not Gentiles. They had read the scriptures, knew that the promise was through Abraham, to Abraham and his descendants... The Holy Spirit had come on Jesus' disciples at Pentecost – the culmination of the promise, the promise *to the Jews* – of God's presence with them forever.

Everybody knew how God worked. And it wasn't like this. It's such a big deal that Peter gets called to task by the the other leaders of the early church in Jerusalem. *Peter!* Gets called in, and as he walks through the door, the other early church leaders say, "What did you do?!" They come after him – you can picture this – they say, "How could you go and eat with Gentiles?" Peter says – "Ummm - Yeah – it's worse than that. I baptized them."

"You did what?!"

And then Peter tells them the story. We get the whole story from the last chapter about the vision and his visit to Cornelius repeated again – most of it word for word. (*Dear reader. This is important!*)

"And then," he says "the Holy Spirit fell upon them – just as it had upon us at the beginning..." Peter said, "Then I remembered what Jesus had said – how he said John baptized with water, but *you* will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If God gave them the same gift he gave us when we believed in Jesus – then who was I to hinder God?"

The other church leaders listen. They listen. They are silent. And then they praise God, saying, "So it's true. God has given the gift of repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles..."

The story for us today...

Everybody knew how God worked. They'd read about it in the Bible, they'd learned about it in church. Everybody – even Peter – knew that God didn't work with the Gentiles. They'd been interpreting the story like this for generations. They never questioned it. Everybody they knew agreed with them.

Everybody knew how God worked. Until that day at Cornelius' house, when God proved otherwise.

The United Church of Christ reminded us all a few years back with a slogan that you probably remember. It said, "*God is still speaking.*"

This isn't an "anything goes". But it is a recognition that the fullness of the work of God is still being revealed to us. And we may just find that our faithful understanding of how God works needs revision.

I promised those of you who've been part of our Sunday morning Bible Study over the past several weeks that this morning's story would serve as a sort of capstone to the study we've been doing on Bible passages related to sexuality and gender. This story of the early church figuring it out - moving beyond what they *knew to be true*. The people of God were certain - had been certain - *for centuries* that Gentiles were on the outside. Until the Spirit started to move...

Maybe it's good to remember that the church has gone through seismic shifts before – following the work of God – and been blessed. The church in Acts shifted – welcoming in Gentiles. In the 1500s, the Reformation put Bibles in the hands of regular people to read together, following the work of God in people's lives beyond the limits of the state church. The church in America shifted over slavery – we continue to shift over the ordination of women as we see God blessing the work of women in ministry. Women like the incredible pastors this church family has known: women like Cindy and Donna and Mary... Like Anna Lisa and Christy and Donna leading the way - shaping this community into the incredible, faithful community that it is. And now we may very well be in the midst of a seismic shift around issues of sexuality and gender norms. I haven't received a vision quite like Peter – but I, like many of you, have seen God at work in people in ways some have said they *know* God could not be working.

I was a hospice chaplain. I walked alongside all kinds of families as loved ones approached the end of life. More than once I sat beside families of same sex couples. I sat with gay couples who had stood beside each other – in faithful, loving, committed relationships for 30, 40, even 50 years – even though the law of the land meant they were never able to get married. I sat with their families, with their children who told stories of love and care by the parents who raised them.

I wonder - if God has blessed these couples – with faithful, loving, committed families like mine – who are we to hinder God? Who am I to withhold the blessing of the church from those whose relationships God has already blessed?

It's not throwing out of the scriptures. It's re-remembering them, like Peter and the early church. It's a new understanding in light of the work God continues to do...

One of the marvels of this story about Peter and Cornelius, this story at the center of Acts, at the center of the story of the early church – is that it builds into our founding a sense of *openness* to the work of God. It reminds us that this church belongs to God. The Holy Spirit is the one at work – and we are *followers*. God is not bound by our understanding of how God works. This story reminds us to hold lightly onto our certainty - that sometimes the truths that everybody *knows* today about how God works may be brought into question tomorrow by the real working of God.

It's exciting! Don't underestimate God - or the people God might be working through next. It's an invitation to be curious about what God is doing - to be curious about the people around us and what God might just be doing in their lives.

“Be curious. Not judgmental.” Cultivating curiosity may be the prophetic work of our time. And in so doing, we may yet discover the Spirit alive and at work in ways beyond what we thought possible.

Amen.