

“A Cornelius Moment”

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Acts 10:9-17, 23, 34-35, 43-48 = God’s radical inclusion

During examination on the floor of Presbytery, a common question for Ministry Candidates was to ask of each; “Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God.” Are we followers of Jesus willing to press the limits, face alienation, even risk eternal damnation in order to follow God’s plan.



A common question that is until one Ordinand answered: “I am willing to be damned for the glory of God. Not only that. I am willing for this whole

Presbytery to be damned for glory of God.”

I don’t think Peter was quick witted nor foolish enough to come up with such a sarcastic answer to God when Peter was commanded to take on damnation by killing and eating foods strictly forbidden under Jewish Law.

God was testing Peter that day, probing the limits of his faith, pushing him well beyond his comfort zone, testing him to see if he would follow God’s path. Just so, God is probing, pushing, testing us every day, offering us a kingdom opportunity and with it God stretches us beyond our comfort zone,



stretching our faith hard, perhaps occasionally beyond the breaking point. A Cornelius moment.



Its background in Acts is the great drama of salvation in Jesus being extended to the whole world. In Acts 2, the day of Pentecost, the spirit is shared with devout Jews gathered in Jerusalem

and thousands were added.

In Acts 8, Phillip shares Jesus’ Good News with an Ethiopian eunuch, a person near Judaism but just outside the boundary.





Then where we are today in Acts 10, Cornelius a Roman centurion. In Cornelius' home, a second Pentecost, this time among the fully gentile. Step by step God's saving realm is extended further and further out like ripples radiating in a still pond.



You know our story: Peter is at home, hungry and waiting for a meal. He's praying and falls into a trance where a



vision of a sheet filled with all kinds of animals: weasels, snakes, badgers, worms, armadillos, aardvarks, insects. In the vision, Peter was commanded to kill and eat.

Repulsed, Peter answers "No. Never." Three times he rejects. And three times God tells Peter: **"What God has cleaned, do not loathe."**

Don't miss the radicality here. The words translated as "profane or unclean" and in the King James as "common", these translations simply don't get the real sense of the word. The word used to describe the animals Peter was ordered to eat is actually a much stronger term: *"Abomination."*



Peter is shouting, screaming out, "No, Lord, it would be an abomination for me to eat these! You said so in the Law of Moses which I have never disobeyed." Peter knew these to be beyond merely nauseating or disgusting, somethings absolutely forbidden.

We cannot comprehend Peter's fear, loathing and pain in this encounter. We have no idea of his abhorrence at these commands. We live Twenty centuries later in an extraordinarily different culture.

Susan and I have patronized a local restaurant in Florida called the Redwing which serves not just the usual abominable foods forbidden in Scripture, that is, shrimp and pork, but on occasion other forbidden meats ~ armadillo, venison, possum. Almost any restaurant today which serves seafood or sushi would not pass the Biblical test for purity.





God's law forbids Peter even to speak to a gentile, much less enter a gentile home and share a gentile meal. So God gave Peter this vision of abominable animals as a parable to grant him a radical new understanding of God's call and its relation to the ancient laws.

God had to just about hit Peter over the head with a 2X4, but in the end Peter got it. Peter stated this newfound revelation:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality”¹

Cornelius moments come up over and over again in our own lives if we but have the eyes to see. Does God have to hit us over the head with a 2X4 as well? Consider: Who is the gentile in your life? Who are the people you consider beyond the pall? The despised; the enemy; the ones believed to need to apologize and ask for forgiveness? It needs to be said: these are also the very ones Jesus came to claim and redeem.



“I truly understand that God Shows no partiality”

In the Law section of the Hebrew Scripture, there were all kinds of people forbidden to worship God in Israel, persons believed to be hated by God. Now Peter and the Jesus movement are at a teachable moment in realizing God's plan is otherwise, however they have interpreted the ancient texts excluding others. This lesson is for us as well: despite our reading it into scripture, God is definitely not disgusted with the same ones we are. Peter got it:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality”²

God includes in the kingdom: prostitutes and pimps, tax collectors and tax cheats alike, divas and divorcees.

God accepts into God's realm: women and men, slaves and free citizens alike, Jews and Greeks and Ethiopians and pagans and Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, Native Americans, even Anglos.

God embraces: Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Socialists, Fascists and those who don't vote because “it really doesn't make any difference anyway.”

“God shows no partiality”

God accepts: lower class slobs, middle class slackers and even entitled and arrogant upper class snobs.

God includes: weak and strong; healthy and ill; and yes even gay and straight.

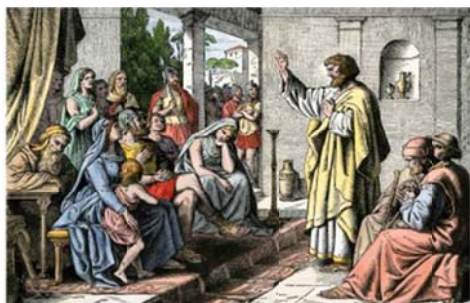
“God shows no partiality”

God not only accepts but blesses: the poor, the sojourners, the immigrants, the undocumented; the meek, humble and those just trying to get by.

God not only accepts but blesses: the abandoned, the hungry and thirsty, the persecuted and reviled.

God invites: the jaded and the jailed, jailbait and the jaundiced.

God includes: the elites, the iconoclasts, the great unwashed.



Peter at the home of Cornelius
“Who would forbid water for baptizing?”

“God indeed shows no partiality” On who? On those “who fear God and do what is right” Peter concludes rightly: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing?”

Peter surprised even himself and was led to a fundamental truth:

“Whenever you draw a line which helps to tell you who is in and who is outside God’s people ~ remember ~ Jesus is always on the other side of the line!”³

We at GPC are at a Cornelius moment. With 38% of our congregation ethnic minority and 28% African immigrants, not to mention Asian and other immigrants and African Americans, we are at a Cornelius moment.



God has presented us with this Cornelius moment and is waiting to see what we do with it. We have diversity. We are inclusive. But let’s be honest, at a rather superficial level so far. Some there are in our congregation who feel left out. Some who feel their voices are not heard. Some who feel disrespected and excluded. Some who feel their culture and their world misrepresented. These while upsetting are actual facts.

To this end your Session is putting together a task group to explore how we can become a more truly inclusive, equitable and just, a more deeply intra-cultural and multi-racial congregation. How we can combat institutional racism at its roots within our walls. So watch this spot as the task group explores ways we might fulfill our Cornelius mandate.

A Cornelius moment: As Peter came out of the altered vision state he sensed himself moving from asleep to awake. He was waking up, easing from a dream-state back to reality.



We too are moving from dream to reality: dream of a truly inclusive congregation and the daunting task to bring to fulfillment. Like all God's opportunities in life, we approach it with fear and trembling, even paralysis, with grief over change.

We have more than enough good, strong, sound reasons not to do it. All except one: God wants us to do it.

¹ Acts 10:34

² Acts 10:34

³ Richard Jensen, *Preaching Mark's Gospel*, p.61