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*No Partiality*  
Acts 10:34-43  
January 12, 2020

What's stunning about Peter's testimony in today's scripture isn't so much what he's saying. If we were to start reading at the beginning of the book of Acts, which is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke, and read all the way up through today's reading, Peter's words would sound very familiar right now, because he's saying more or less what he always says.

What's stunning is who he's talking to.

Let's back up a bit. Four days before Peter speaks these words, a man named Cornelius had a vision. As a Roman centurion, with one hundred soldiers under his command, Cornelius was a big deal. He lived in Caesarea, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea, and it is beautiful there—we stopped there for a couple hours when I was in Israel in October of 2018.

Cornelius was not a Jew but he believed that the Jewish God was the one true God. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly. One afternoon, an angel appears to him and tells him to send for a man named Simon Peter who is staying down the coast in a town called Joppa. And Cornelius sends some men to do that.

The next day, as the men approach Joppa, Peter is having his mid-day prayer time on the roof of the house where he is staying. And while he's praying, it's Peter's turn to have a vision, and it's a doozy. He sees heaven opened, and something like a giant sheet being lowered down to the ground out of the sky by its four corners. The sheet is filled with all kinds of four-footed animals, and reptiles, and birds. Peter hears a voice from heaven, saying, "Get up Peter, kill and eat," and Peter is absolutely horrified because this sheet is filled with many animals that a Jewish person would never dream of eating, so Peter replies, "No Lord, I've never eaten anything

unclean.” And the voice replies, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.” This happens THREE TIMES, and then the sheet is taken back up to heaven.

Peter wakes up from this nightmare and has no idea what to think. One of the biggest things that set the Jewish people apart from everyone else was the way they ate. I tried really hard to think of a modern-day comparison or metaphor to drive home for us today what a big deal this was, and maybe still is for some of our Jewish brothers and sisters today, and my imagination simply failed me. I’m pretty sure the disgust I feel for bananas and mayonnaise does not come anywhere near the disgust Peter felt during his vision, when he’s being told to eat food he’s avoided his whole life, like pork. Perhaps for us it might be a little like being told to eat a mouse or a cockroach.

As Peter tries to make sense of things, the men sent by Cornelius show up. The Holy Spirit tells Peter, “Get up and go down to those men, because I have sent them.” So Peter does, and he hears about Cornelius and his message from the angel, and agrees to go with them back to Caesarea, and he takes some of the believers from Joppa with him.

When Peter arrives, Cornelius and his relatives and friends are gathered together, waiting for him. Cornelius is so excited to see Peter that he at first tries to worship him, until Peter stops him. Never known for his gracious manners, Peter says, “We all know I’m not supposed to be here, because Jews are forbidden to visit Gentiles”—but, and here we see that Peter is beginning to get a glimmer of the meaning of the bizarre vision HE had seen, because he continues, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean—so when I was sent for, I came, and now I’d like to know WHY you sent for me.”

Cornelius tells Peter about the vision he himself had seen four days earlier and the instructions he had been given. The powerful military commander says to the former fisherman, “I sent for you, you have been kind enough to come, we’re all here, in the presence of God, to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

Somewhere between his stomach-turning vision and this moment, Peter has his own Epiphany experience, and begins speaking the message that Luke-Acts has been building up to all along: “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.”

Before Peter can finish speaking, the Spirit comes upon them, and Cornelius and his family and friends begin to speak in tongues and praise God, and the believers who had come from Joppa with Peter are blown away that even the Gentiles receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter then has them baptized, and as a sign of how radically his perspective has changed, he stays with Cornelius for several days before moving on to Jerusalem. Peter will have some SERIOUS explaining to do when he returns to the church in Jerusalem, so it’s a good thing he has those guys from Joppa as witnesses to back him up.

What’s astounding about this story is that up until now, it’s only been the rare Gentile individual who becomes a believer and receives the Holy Spirit. This is the first story about a whole group of them. And they do not convert to Judaism. They don’t get circumcised. They don’t change their diet. They do get baptized.

And you know, we modern-day Gentiles are so used to being included in the family of God that we forget what a big deal this was. The original shock and awe of this story has faded over the years, but still, there are several things in here that have the potential for enormous blessing if we pay attention to them.

The first is the fact that it's Peter who is directed to go to Cornelius. Peter, the insider, has to physically get up, leave his comfort zone, and go to the outsider. As a church, of course we always want to be as welcoming as we possibly can, but the more we Christians can get up and get outside our comfort zones and go to meet others, the better off we will be, as uncomfortable as it may initially feel. .

I loved and highly recommend an article that has made the rounds on social media called "My Semester with the Snowflakes." It's written by retired Navy Seal James Hatch, who at age 52 decided to go back to school and is now the oldest freshman at Yale in the class of 2023. It's a great piece about how studying at Yale and interacting with the students and faculty has transformed him, and he writes that to him, the real snowflake is the person who never takes the opportunity to discuss ideas in a group of people who will very likely respectfully disagree with them—and he's yet to find any snowflakes at Yale. He did find a lot of hard-working, fiercely bright people, some of whom signed a card thanking him for his service and gave it to him on Veterans' Day. He met people who shattered his stereotypes left and right. But he had to go there and be in that environment for that to happen for him.

And while most of us don't get to go all the way to Yale, there is always a way, and it is never too late, to get up and go in some form or another. Perhaps we can journey across the hall or the street or the cubicle or the classroom, and engage our neighbor. If we can't stretch our legs, we can stretch our minds around new ideas, we can open our ears to new languages and stories, we can open our eyes to other points of view, and we can open our hearts to all the compassion out there that is coming at us all the time, if we let it. There is great reward in GOING. That is takeaway number one.

Takeaway number two is from a phrase Peter uses, “I truly understand.” The Greek word here is *katalambanomai*, which is most accurately translated as, “I am gaining the understanding.” Understanding isn’t a once and done kind of thing. It’s a lifelong process. Peter had reached a decisive, dramatic moment in his understanding, but it was a process, and it’s a process that we too, must continually be open to. And it’s scary, because it means that, like Peter, we sometimes have to let go of cherished ideas about how God works in the world, and let go of our ideas about who is worthy of our time and attention. Christians have to do this in every generation. Over the years we’ve had to let go of ideas about race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and gender identity, to name just a few—and who knows what’s next, although, here’s one thing we do know, and this is the third thing we can take away from today’s scripture.

That third thing is that the Spirit always includes. The Spirit always expands. The Spirit is always showing us more and more of who God is, and how big God is. There’s that wonderful description in C.S. Lewis’s book, *Prince Caspian*, one of the Narnia books, where the character Lucy, a little girl, is reunited with Aslan the lion after returning to Narnia one year after she left. She’s overjoyed to see him, and runs to him, and throws her arms around him, and then she steps back and remarks, “Aslan, you’re bigger.” He says, “That is because you are older, little one.” She says, “Not because you are?” He says, “I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

If an idea, or thought, or vision makes us want to throw up, makes us uncomfortable, makes us want to run, it might be from God. And if an idea, thought, or vision makes God smaller, if it leaves somebody out, or favors one nation over another, rest assured it is not from God. So, we know 2020 will be a year where all of us get older. But may it also be a year where

the Spirit helps us grow, where we get up and go, gain understanding, and find God bigger. Let us pray: