

Sermon for Sunday, July 25, 2010
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SURPRISED BY JOY
Acts 10:27-36

We humans are a strange lot. We like good news, but we have a morbid fascination with the bad. We hate bad news, yet we cannot help but fix our eyes and ears upon it. When there is an accident on the road, people do not speed by to avoid seeing the carnage, they slow down for a look. If an accident occurs on highway 40 or 270 the traffic jams both directions as everyone slows down to look. That is sensible, since we do need to know and avoid his world's dangers. Still...

We are strange. We love good news, but we get tired of it. Some thrill over the gospel every day. For others, it becomes almost wearisome. At Christmas, some groan, "Not 'Joy to the World' again." We want a new song. We want something NEW." I wonder if we hear ourselves...

There is something sensible here, too. The ultimate crime for a Christian preacher is to propagate falsehood, but perhaps the penultimate crime is making Christianity [seem] boring. We want to stay fresh and excited; we don't want to hear the same ideas in the same words over and over. Happily, that never needs to happen. The Bible is one story, but it has hundreds of subplots. It has one theme, but so many variations it makes Mozart look like a slacker.

Faithful Christians often hear good old news. Yet we need to hear the unchanging gospel in fresh ways, for it speaks afresh to new problems in our ever-changing world. Acts 10 treats a familiar theme, but the variations should astonish us. It starts with two men at prayer and a double vision and ends with an apostle re-learning an important lesson about the gospel and the world.

1. God grants revelations to move his people forward (10:1-16)

Cornelius's vision (10:1-8)

The story begins with a Roman centurion at prayer in a Jewish city called Caesarea. He was there as part of the Roman force that occupied Israel in the New Testament era. A Centurion is the principal officer in the army. He leads and organizes the Roman forces that defile Israel with idolatry and rob them through exorbitant taxes.

But this centurion is different (10:1-2). He fears God and gives to the poor. He does not worship the emperor or pagan deities. He follows the Ten Commandments and other basic principles. But he has not submitted to the whole of the law. He refused the laws that mark the Jews: food laws, sacrifices, laws of association. The last would make it impossible for him to be a Roman centurion. A sympathetic figure, but Jews may think, "Not fully committed."

Cornelius was at prayer, according to custom, at 3 p.m., the hour of prayer at temple. In broad daylight, he had a vision of an angel who said, "Your prayers ascend to God, who hears you. Now send to Joppa for a man named Peter staying with Simon the tanner by the sea" (10:3-6).

Cornelius obeyed the vision and sent two servants plus a devout soldier on a strange mission: "I don't know who he is, where he lives, what he will say, but go find a man named Peter, who lives with Simon the tanner, in Joppa - thirty miles or two days' walk away." And off they go to find Peter (10:7-8).

Peter also had a vision (10:9-16)

As a Jew, Peter had to observe certain laws that set Jews apart publicly. They were part of a Jew's identity, part of their effort to be pure, undefiled by other nations. Peter had begun to "relax" some of these. He was ministering in Joppa on the coastal plain (9:32-43). Many Gentiles lived there. Further, Peter stayed with Simon the tanner – think skin animal hides and skin covering, not beds with lamps for

skin coloring. A tanner works with animal skins which are unclean, so Peter has already started to let ministry over-ride some concerns about ritual purity. But Peter gave an inch and God takes a mile, in the vision he gave Peter.

As Cornelius' servants approach the city, Peter goes to the roof to pray. It's noon, Peter gets hungry and someone prepares food (10:9-10). God uses the smells it seems and gives him a vision of food – unclean food. A sheet from heaven has all kinds of animals, clean and unclean, according to Moses' law (10:11-12). To this day, orthodox Jews observe laws about purity of food, such as don't eat pork or shell fish.

The same vision came to him three times. Three times a voice says, "Rise Peter, kill and eat." Peter says, "Never Lord, I never ate anything impure or unclean." Bacon never touched my lips (10:11-14).

Three times the voice replies, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Surely this rings in his ears. All his life, he called certain food unclean because God's word labeled them unclean. The distinction between clean and unclean food has ended. Jesus began the process: "Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean... What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean' (Mark 7:18, 20) Here God announces it again.

Does Peter understand this? Probably not. It can be difficult to learn new lessons. We often have to hear something three or four times.

Heeding God's voice today

The first time we hear something new something that challenges treasured views – it comes as a jolt, even an offense. For example, bodies in a new creation.

2. We must receive and act upon God's revelation (10:17-29).

Peter reflects on his vision, then acts (10:17-23)

The vision of the sheet from heaven ends with Peter silent, wondering. Just then, precisely then, Cornelius' men arrive. The arrival is no accident. They walked two days, then arrived in a strange city. There are no phone books, no computers in the city hall. They have to go to market and start asking strangers, "Does anyone know of a tanner named Simon living near the coast?" At the right time, someone tells them, so they arrive to knock at the door, just as the sheet disappears for the third and final time (10:17-18).

As they arrive, the Spirit tells Peter, "You have visitors. Go down meet them, go with them!" He goes down and says, "I am Peter. Why have you come?" (10:19-21).

Cornelius' men present their case in the most favorable terms. They invite Peter to the home of a centurion [roughly an invitation to the home of an officer in the secret police]. But he is not just any centurion. He is a man of God waiting to hear from Peter, a man of God (10:22).

Here Peter has his first "Aha!" experience. The centurion knows exactly what he asks of Peter and Peter knows that he knows. The centurion is sympathetic, but his house is unclean. Indeed, the centurion himself is unclean. Cornelius has declined to take the burden of clean and unclean. That separates him from Peter and Judaism. Now he asks Peter to come, to bear the burden, to defile self.

But the voice rings in Peter's ears, "What God has called clean, do not call unclean." Peter invites them in to the house; that is barely legal for a Jew (10:23a). The next day, he obeys and does the harder thing. Taking six companions, six witnesses, he travels to the home of the unclean centurion (10:23b).

Cornelius has acted on his vision (10:24)

Peter meets Cornelius, who bows as to an angel. Peter will have none of it. "We are both men." They go inside. Peter sees a crowd. Acting on his vision, Cornelius issued a successful invitation to his friends and relatives: "You have to come to my house and hear a man named Peter:

- I don't know exactly who he is – perhaps he had some idea.
- I don't know when he'll arrive; roughly four days after the vision.
- I don't know what he will say - although it probably has to do with God.
- But you must come. He persuades them! They come and wait.

Our need to act today

I commend many of you who invite friends as Cornelius did. I wish more of us had the spirit of Cornelius – using our persuasive skills, our passion for the lost and for the Lord, to bring friends to hear from God. And consider Peter, taking such a risk because he resolved to obey the Lord's command.

3. We must treasure the gospel

Peter forgets the gospel. Peter arrives at the house, looks at crowd and says, "I never would have come, but God showed me I should, for no man is impure or unclean. So I came, but may I inquire, why am I here?" (10:28-29).

We want to laugh. Peter, is it possible that you really don't know why God brought you to these people? That you don't know what you have for them? That you forget that Jesus commissioned you to make disciples of the nations and to be his witness to the ends of the earth?

But even the apostle has not fully understood his own gospel. But let us not laugh, for we are too much like Peter. We think we know it all; we sometimes feel we know it all to the point of boredom. Yet we have such an amazing ability to forget that sometimes it seems that we do not know anything at all.

Cornelius requests the gospel (30-33)

Cornelius describes his vision. An angel told him to send for Peter; he did so at once. "It was good of you to come. Now we are all here to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." No better attitude as we come to worship, to hear the word. Each word is right:

- 1) We are all here – a community of listeners, not just individuals.
- 2) We are here before God – Not here and elsewhere, day-dreaming, judging the people near you, judging how the speaker is doing, deciding if this is a waste of time. We are "before God."
- 3) We're here to listen, not to have ear drums vibrate. We're here to listen, meditate, contemplate, drink it in.
- 4) We listen to everything. Not just the sweet, happy, familiar, comforting things. No, we listen to everything the Lord says.
- 5) The Lord commanded: the messenger is God's mouthpiece.
- 6) The Lord commanded. The speaker has no options. If he keeps God's message in, "his word is in my heart like a fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9).
- 7) The Lord commanded you Peter. Like Peter all pastors and teachers are under orders. We must bring out of the storehouse treasures new as well as old.
- 8) The Lord commanded you to tell us: Tell us God's message, always sweet in the mouth because God's word is always sweet. Tell us even if bitter because it addresses sin and declares judgment. Tell us, tell us, what God has said.

Peter is moved and proclaims the gospel (34-43)

Peter hears this and replies: "Now I realize..." (10:34-35). Peter has learned, grasped something strong. It's something he knew, yet didn't know. Now he really knows: God has no favorites: no favorite face, no favorite race. Surely Peter knew Jesus would talk with anybody, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile. He saw Jesus heal Gentiles, talk to Samaritans, purge demoniacs.

Yet he says, "Now I know." Now I know the gospel is for Jew and Gentile, that God "accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"(10:34-35). Then Peter proceeds to preach the gospel. Peter summarizes the ministry of Jesus due to the group's ignorance (10:36-41):

- God declares peace to all men, through Jesus Christ, Lord of all. (10:36).
- After God anointed him with the Holy Spirit, Jesus healed all in Israel who were under the devil's power. He healed and taught freely (10:37-38).
- We are witnesses: His countrymen hanged him, crucified him. But God raised him from the dead and he was seen by many witnesses (10:39-40).
- Therefore we must proclaim his resurrection. He is judge, but "all the prophets testify... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:41-43).

Notice that Peter says the prophets have always declared this gospel. How then could he also say earlier, "Now I realize. Today I comprehended the gospel"?

Humans are strange. We laugh at Peter, although we're just like Peter. We know the gospel and don't know it. It is so simple, even a four year old can grasp the basics: We are sinners, God loves us so much he sent his Son, who died and rose for us, so that whoever believes will receive eternal life. The basics are so simple, yet we grow inattentive, we fail to plumb the depths. Then, like Peter, we wake up and shout, "Now I realize!"

This week I played in two "important" tennis matches. My partner is a good player and good friend from Central. We had to win both matches. If we did, our team would win our district and go on to regional play for aging tennis players. Over two hours, each match was decided by just a few points. We won the first, lost the second. I hardly slept the second night! We almost won, we should have won. Two points! We looked for perspective. Obviously, we're both glad to be healthy enough to play, to be outdoors, to have friends on a team. But does the gospel say more to our disappointment? Yes.

First, sport is part of life, but not its essence. God loves us whether we win or lose, as do our family and friends. Our athletic skills are neither reliable nor redeeming. Our conduct on the court isn't always perfect, either. But God is perfect and reliable and redeeming. My friend said, "through His love for us on the Cross he won a victory that is far more lasting and fulfilling. It doesn't feel like it's right after we lose, but the truths of the faith don't rely on the way we feel."

Of course, we have far greater failures than sporting events. The gospel reminds us God loves us even when we fall short. He loves everyone who feels worthless, everyone who never heard their father or mother say, "I love you, I'm proud of you." The gospel cures our ache for acceptance. It says my performance will never make God love me more, will never make him love me less. We don't need to prove ourselves, nor can we prove ourselves to God. No matter how skillful, diligent, or effective we are, God will never say, "At last, I can love you."

He loves us while we are sinners. He loves us with an everlasting love. We know this, but like Peter, we forget and lapse back into performance. Then we wake up and see the gospel again. We say, "Now I realize! Now I get it - God welcomes me without conditions!" What a joy, what a relief. Like Peter, we can forget the gospel. Yet the Lord reminds us and we preach it – at least to ourselves.

Peter remembered the gospel, so the sermon proceeded. But the conclusion came slightly before Peter had planned it (10:44-48). The Spirit himself sealed the gospel, coming to a large crowd while Peter

preached. The Spirit made the crowd full partners in the gospel before they are baptized or adopted any laws. Peter then seals it by baptizing Cornelius' clan that hour.

Now we no longer need to distinguish clean and unclean – in foods or in men. The gospel is for Jew and Gentiles, for God has accepted all who believe, apart from any law. Now that you are free, treasure your joys – your children, spouse, friends. Your achievements. Even as a friend departs, rejoice that God brought you together. Treasure your joys. More than that, treasure the gospel.

The joy of the gospel

People get tired of the theme, "Jesus died for our sins." But beloved friends, please don't grow tired of the variations on the atonement: Justification, reconciliation, redemption, propitiation, sanctification.

- He rose to justify us. To take us to the court room and declare us innocent. Can we grow tired of the release this gives to those who suffer self-condemnation?
- He came to reconcile us to himself. To make peace, to make friends. Can we grow tired of this good news to all who wonder if anyone loves them?
- He paid to redeem us, to deliver us from captivity to sin, death and the devil. Can we grow weary of this word for all who feel trapped by sin?
- He offered sacrifice for our sins. He bore the punishment we deserve for sin and put aside his wrath toward us. What a privilege to bring good news to all who know the wrongs they've done.
- He lives to sanctify us. To remake us in the image of our God, in the image of Himself. To be our big brother. To welcome us into His family and do spiritual surgery so that even adopted children show a family resemblance.

Each point meets our need, so people say with Peter, "Now I realize! Now I realize!" Forget not His benefits, and forget not to praise His name of glory.

- He is Jesus, He has come to save his people from their sins.
- He is Immanuel, God with us, from beginning to end of our work in his Kingdom.
- He is the Great Prophet, mighty in word and deed.
- He is the Son of David, come to set his people free.
- He is the Great High Priest who does his work and sits down, finished, at the right hand of the majesty, cleansing sins once for all.
- He is the judge of all the earth. Yet he is also the servant.
- He is the alpha and the omega, root and offspring of David, lamb and the lion.

Every title, every task meets a need, cures a sorrow for his people. There is so much to explore that we need never weary of it. So people say, "Now I realize! Now I realize!" May we see the glory of the gospel afresh every day.

So treasure the gospel. Receive it. Believe in Christ and find peace in the gospel. Unite your heart to Christ and join in his resurrection life. As Cornelius told Peter, let us tell the Lord: We are here in your presence to listen to everything you tell us. The hard but necessary word of repentance, the sweet but humbling word of grace and pardon.

Savor it. If you feel guilty, remember justification. If trapped by sin and life's circumstances, remember redemption. If you feel alone, friendless, remember reconciliation. If you feel stuck, making no progress, remember sanctification. Treasure every aspect of the gospel.