

"Breaking Down Barriers"
Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 10:1-23

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(New International Version 1984, ©1984)

Cornelius Calls for Peter

¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Peter's Vision

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three ^[a] men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

²² The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

Peter at Cornelius's House

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 10:19](#) One early manuscript *two*; other manuscripts do not have the number.
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Introduction.

Turning points are moments in time during which decisive change occurs. Historians point to D-Day as the turning point of WW2. Political scientists say the televised debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in 1960 was the turning point in the presidential election that year. And reporters tell us the 18 days of recent protest in Tahrir Square was the turning point for the political change that is taking place in Egypt and Hosni Mubarak's dramatic resignation Friday.

Turning points define our lives, and they even change the course of history. This morning we come across a turning point in the life of the early church, for the conversion of Cornelius was a significant and



decisive change in the work of God in the world. It was a time when the gospel was embraced by the first Gentile convert ever.

I. A Devout Soldier.

The mission of the early church continued to expand, and the time had come for the gospel to cross the racial barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles. The Good News of Jesus Christ had already been taken to Samaria, a racially mixed group of people who were still primarily Jewish. Philip also shared the gospel with the eunuch from Ethiopia who traveled to Jerusalem in his search for God. But never had the Good News been presented to numbers of people who were exclusively non-Jewish altogether. All of that was about to change in the 10th chapter of Acts.

Caesarea was a city on the coastal plain of Sharon in northern Palestine along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and it was about 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem. The city was named in honor of Augustus Caesar, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, and Herod the Great made the harbor into a magnificent seaport and he transformed the city into a center of Roman culture. He also established Caesarea as the capital of the province of Judea, and he had a palace built there.

A centurion named Cornelius was stationed in this city. The name Cornelius was a common one in the Roman world, because in 82 BC a man named Cornelius Sulla liberated 10,000 slaves, all of whom took their patron's name as they established themselves in Roman society. This Cornelius was probably a descendent of one of the freedmen. The text also tells us that he was a centurion in what is known as the Italian Regiment. In the Roman military, a centurion was equivalent to a captain or company commander in our military terminology, and he led a group of about 100 soldiers.

Cornelius is described as being devout and God-fearing, and he was respected by all the Jewish people. The phrase "God-fearer" was a technical used to describe someone who had converted to Judaism in every way except one - they had not taken the final step of being circumcised. There were many adult men who were reluctant to take this final step of conversion to the Jewish faith for obvious reasons. Having realized the spiritual bankruptcy of paganism, it appears that Cornelius sought to worship the one true God, whom the Jews called Yahweh.

One day about the three o'clock in the afternoon, one of the stated times of prayer for the Jews, an angel of the Lord appeared to Cornelius in a vision and the angel called him by name. The angel said God had a special job for him, and he went on to instruct Cornelius to send some men to Joppa and bring back a man named Simon who was also called Peter. The centurion was accustomed to receiving and following orders, so he sent two of his servants and one of his soldiers at once to do as the Lord commanded him.

Why did God choose Cornelius to be the first Gentile convert? What was it about the centurion that caused the Lord to select him? There are several things Luke mentions that give us insight. We are told that he was devout in his worship, and he was a person of prayer. We are also told that he was generous in his gifts to the poor. These things speak volumes about the man's character which had been cultivated over a lifetime.

Have you ever wondered, "Why hasn't God ever spoken to me in a vision? Why don't I see God show up in big ways in my life like I read about in the Bible?" Perhaps it is because you and I need to work on cultivating the character of Christ more fully in our lives like Cornelius. God seems to reveal Himself to people who have trained their eyes to look for the fingerprints of God in the world, ones who have tuned their ears to hear His voice when He calls.

Gordon MacDonald writes¹ that character does not identify us by our physical appearance, our influence in the community, our education, or our wealth. Character is not about the cars we drive, the achievements we ring up, or the charm and charisma we manifest. Rather, character is who we are at the level of the soul, the hidden life within us when no one is watching, and how we are most likely to think and act both in the



routines of day-to-day living as well as in life's toughest moments when adversity comes our way. What kind of character are you cultivating in your life, and how does God want you to go deeper in Him?

II. A Hesitant Apostle.

It is difficult to fully appreciate the gulf which existed between Jews and Gentiles in those days.ⁱⁱ The OT did not endorse or encourage such a divide. On the contrary, the OT affirmed that God had a unique purpose in blessing the Jews, and that purpose was so they could be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The psalmists and prophets foretold the day when God's Messiah would inherit the nations, the Lord's servant would be their light, all the nations would flow to the house of the Lord, and God would pour out His Spirit on all humankind.

The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, and over time they were filled with racial pride and hatred toward others. The Jews despised Gentiles and called them "dogs", and they developed traditions which kept them apart. This prejudice had to be overcome before Gentiles could be included in the Christian community, and the apostle Peter became God's chosen instrument to break down the barriers.

About noon the next day, while Cornelius' men were approaching the city of Joppa, which was about 32 miles from Caesarea, Peter went up on the flat roof of the home where he was staying. While lunch was being prepared, he had an extraordinary vision. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down by its four corners. The sheet contained all kinds of animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. It was a mixture of what were considered by Jewish people as both clean and unclean animals, and it was intended to disgust any orthodox Jew. The dietary laws in the OT prohibited any devout Jewish person from eating such things as pork, shellfish, and birds of prey like eagles. But in the vision a voice called out to Peter and said, "Get up, kill and eat." This happened three consecutive times.

The apostle was shocked and repulsed at the suggestion, and his response was, "Surely not, Lord! No way! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean before." Peter had always observed the dietary restrictions of Leviticus 11, and he was offended by the mingling of the animals in the vision. However, God used the repeated image to reinforce the message and overcome Peter's reluctance and opposition.

What is your response when God calls you to do something for Him? How do you react when the Lord pushes you out of your comfort zone, as He did Peter? When God calls you to do something new, are you reluctant or are you ready to obey?

God says, "I want you to forgive that person and put the past behind you."

We respond, "Surely not, Lord! No way!"

God says, "I want you to make time in your busy schedule to teach Sunday School and give yourself away in service to children."

We respond, "Surely not, Lord! No way!"

God says, "I want you to step out in faith and trust me with your future. Quit worrying so much about your finances."

We respond, "Surely not, Lord! No way!"

Who is the leader, and who is the follower in your relationship with Christ? When God calls you to a task, what is your response? Surely not, Lord! Or are you open to His leading without hesitation, like Cornelius was and eventually like the apostle Peter?

III. A Powerful Turning Point.

While Peter was thinking about the vision, Cornelius' men arrived, and the Lord explained to Peter he was to go with them. It is interesting to note that the word which is translated "do not hesitate" can also mean "make no distinction." Peter began to understand that although the vision challenged the basic



distinction between clean and unclean foods, the Spirit related this in Peter's mind to the distinction between clean and unclean people, Jews and Gentiles.

The apostle went down and greeted his visitors. When he learned of their mission and of Cornelius and his vision, Peter invited them to stay as his guests, even though they were Gentiles, something no orthodox Jew would do. God was beginning to break down the barriers, and it was a turning point in salvation history. Peter traveled to Caesarea, Cornelius was baptized, and the history of the church has never been the same. You and I are worshipping Jesus Christ today because the Gospel was open to Gentiles like us.

Racial hostility was a problem in the ancient world, but it is still a problem today. From the systematic horror of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia, Rwanda and the Sudan to the random violence in our cities, our world seems caught up in a tidal wave of racial, tribal and ethnic prejudice. This hostility threatens the foundations of our society. Racism is a sin precisely because it keeps us from loving our neighbor as Jesus commanded, and because it has its roots in pride and arrogance.

When I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1953, it was one year before the Supreme Court ruled in favor of integrated schools. It was 11 years before a civil rights law forced restaurants and motels to serve all races. It was 12 years before Congress guaranteed minorities the right to vote. Gas stations in those days had three labeled restrooms - White Women, White Men, and Colored. Department stores had two drinking fountains - White and Colored. On buses in Atlanta, workmen and maids sat dutifully in the rear section and were required by law to give up their seats if white riders wanted them. We ate at different restaurants, we played in different parks, and we attended different schools. Blacks also could not sit on the main floor of a movie theater; they had to sit in the balcony.

That was the way it was in Austin, too. I recently learned that when I-35 was built 50 years ago, there were a number of reasons it was constructed where it is today but one of the outcomes was that it divided the city along racial and socio-economic lines. Austin didn't have people living on the other side of the tracks, just the other side of I-35. That division continues today to a large extent.

One of the marks of the past which reflects poorly on the Westlake community is that this part of Austin experienced incredible growth in the 1970s largely as a result of white flight. When the Eanes Independent School District was formed in 1969, people from Austin left in droves to make sure their kids didn't have to deal with court-ordered bussing and they relocated to this part of the world. Our community was founded in part because of racism and fear.

It is easy to think that racism in America is a thing of the past, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking this way. There is a little racism in all of us, and we're uncomfortable with people who are different. We make assumptions when we see someone of another race, and we jump to conclusions all too quickly. When you walk to your car in downtown Austin on 6th Street late at night after having dinner and you see a black man standing off to the side by himself, do you tense up in the same way you would if he was a white college student? When you board a plane to fly somewhere and you see another passenger who is of Arab descent, are you uneasy for the rest of the flight and wonder if he's a terrorist?

Last week I was in Dallas for a denominational meeting, and there were many people of different ethnicities at the gathering. I remember seeing an Asian woman, and I assumed she was an international. As I prepared to meet her and engage in conversation, I tried to listen carefully as I anticipated she would be hard to understand. You can imagine my chagrin when she opened her mouth and discovered she had grown up in this country and lived in the San Francisco Bay area.

How many people of color do you know? Who in your circle of friends is a person of another race? In what ways are you breaking down barriers in your world? As Christians we need to address our own prejudice in all its subtle forms. We need to push beyond our comfort zones and need to repent of our own bias and pride. The call to break down the barriers in our lives is the call Peter heard 2,000 years ago. It is still a call we need to hear today.



Conclusion.

What have been the turning points of your life? When did you hear God invite you to join Him on a new adventure that caused you to step out in faith? How is the Lord asking you to break down some prejudices of your own? In what way does God want you to make 2011 a year of breaking down barriers?

Austin Bridge Builders Alliance is a ministry with who our church partners. They have set 2011 as a year for breaking down the walls in this city. I look forward to finding out more and exploring how our church can be involved in making this more of a reality in this community.

Ruby Bridges was born in 1954 in Mississippi in a small cabin. Her family moved to New Orleans three years later because her father lost his job picking crops. The schools in New Orleans were still segregated at that time, although laws had already been passed making segregation illegal.

In 1960, the year Ruby was to enter the first grade, she and four other African American girls were ordered to attend two different white elementary schools. Only Ruby was sent to the William Frantz Elementary School. On the first day of classes, crowds of angry white citizens gathered outside the school to protest. President Eisenhower ordered federal marshals to accompany Ruby to and from school each day to protect her. And each day she paused for a few moments before reaching the angry crowd to pray for them. Once, having forgotten to do so beforehand, Ruby stopped in the midst of the crowd to pray. She was the only child to attend school at the William Frantz Elementary School for much of that year. All the white children were kept away by their parents.

Harvard professor Robert Coles was curious about what went into the making of courageous children like Ruby Bridges, and he went down there to find out. He talked to Ruby's mother and, in his book *The Moral Life of Children*, he tells what she said: "There's a lot of people who talk about doing good, and a lot of people who argue about what's good and what's not good, but there are other folks who just put their lives on the line for what's right." That, friends, is the courage to break down barriers.

Billy Graham once wrote: "...No other force exists besides the church that can bring people together week after week and deal with their deepest hurts and suspicions. Of all people, Christians should be the most active in reaching out to those of other races, instead of accepting the status quo of division and animosity.

"The issues that face us are complex and enormous, and simply wishing they would go away will not solve them. I do not pretend to know the full answer. But let those of us who claim the name of Christ repent of our past failures and, relying on the Holy Spirit, demonstrate to a weary and frightened world that Christ indeed 'has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... through the cross by which he put to death their hostility' (Eph. 2:14,15)."ⁱⁱⁱ May we heed the call of Christ Himself to break down barriers. It could be a turning point for you and me. Amen.

ⁱ Gordon MacDonald, *Mid-Course Correction*, p. 120.

ⁱⁱ John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, The Church, and the World*, p.185.

ⁱⁱⁱ Billy Graham, p.27.

