

### **Acts 10:1-33**

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. **2** He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. **3** One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." **4** He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. **5** Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; **6** he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." **7** When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, **8** and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

**9** About noon the next 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 it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. **11** He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. **12** In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. **13** Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." **14** But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." **15** The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." **16** This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. **17** Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. **18** They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.

**19** While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. **20** Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." **21** So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" **22** They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a

*Who's In, Who's Out*

**A sermon preached by**  
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Acts 10:1-33

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holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." **23** So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. **24** The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. **26** But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." **27** And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; **28** and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. **29** So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" **30** Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. **31** He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. **32** Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' **33** Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."



My parents and I used to spend our vacations at Pine Haven Campground near Sea Isle City, New Jersey every summer from about 1967 to 1979. My mom and I and my aunts and cousins would spend the month of August there, the dads would come down for weekends and their vacation weeks. I remember the heat of the sand at the campground lake as I tried to make my way to the water. I remember the smell of campfires and the coolness of nighttime under the pines in our tent trailer. Visits to the boardwalk at Ocean City were rare, which is, I guess, why I remember the excitement of the boardwalk so vividly. Those times at the Shore were so important and special to me that I've been going back there again the past few years – sharing with my kids that same wonderful

experience.

There is one particular event, though, which I will never forget, one unique event which – I can say without exaggeration – changed my perspective on life forever. My brother was in college, my sister was about to have a baby, and I was getting ready to turn 10 years old. It was barely pre-Woodstock, 1969.

It was the evening of July 20. My dad had come to the shore as usual for part of his vacation but this time it was different, he brought along our television. We only had one, a 19 inch black and white set, considered portable then, obsolete now. We had electricity at the campsite but reception was not very good. My dad decided that we needed to take the television somewhere else, I'm not sure if it was for a better picture or because he needed to share this particular evening with others. We took it to the pavilion down by the lake where we knew there was more open space and an outlet to plug into. Neil Armstrong was about to walk on the moon and my dad was going to make sure that we didn't miss it.

Some others wandered into the pavilion and we all sat around this television with the scratchy picture trying to make out what was going on. What made it even more difficult was the fact that at the other end of the pavilion was the jukebox where teenage kids would hangout. They continued to play their music and make enough noise that we couldn't hear what was happening on the moon. My dad grew more and more frustrated and angry. I'm sure he didn't like the music – he and our pastor had threatened to buy WIBG, Philadelphia's AM rock station, just so he could shut it down – but I think what made him more angry was the disrespect of the kids. Even when asked politely they refused to quiet down until as the time got closer he just walked over and unplugged the jukebox. Despite a few, "Aw, c'mon man!"s and several "Don't be so uptight!"s, the crowd eventually came to an awed hush, even the teens, as feet entered the screen, and descended the ladder on the side of the landing module. Jumping to the moon's surface Armstrong made his famous statement and the world took one collective sigh. What a great night that was!

I remember the photographs that emerged from our space exploration. Some had come out during previous Apollo missions, more came out following that night. Photos of the moon from the space capsules. Photos of the earth from out in space. But one had more impact on me than any other. This one beautiful photo was taken by the astronauts from the moon's surface and it captured the earth as it appeared over the moon's horizon. Do you remember it? It was so popular back then that it became the subject of posters and Christmas cards. I even remember worship bulletins with the words "In the beginning ..." printed at the bottom. I remember it clearly. The earth just above the rim of the moon – the blue/green of the oceans visible through the white clouds of the atmosphere framed by the blackness of space. Everyone probably tried to figure out what part of earth we were looking at, I was certain that I could make out where I lived.

What strikes me even today about the photograph is not just its beauty but its awesomeness. For the first time ever we could see ourselves from a different perspective. Since creation we had been looking up – up at the stars and the other planets, up at the sun, at the moon. Everything seemed so far away, everything seemed "out there". We had always been the center of creation. Even when ancient astronomers began to reveal to us that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun rather than the sun around the earth, we still somehow saw ourselves as the center of creation.

Suddenly, though, in 1969 we could now vicariously see ourselves from elsewhere, from the moon looking back on earth, from space looking down on our existence. That day, 40 years ago tomorrow in fact, changed our outlook on who we are and where we are in creation. As we venture further out into space now with our space shuttles and unstaffed probes and telescopes and international space stations, as we watch with amazement the, there has been a gradual acceptance of the fact that we are not at the center, that we are but a tiny piece of the entirety of what God has created and that the entirety somehow operates as a whole, each piece dependent on others.

The revelation that began for me that day in 1969 was the fact that we have no right deciding who's in and who's out. We are not the center of anything. I began to realize, in the kind of way that my 10 year old mind formed opinions, that we cannot make decisions that define ourselves as us and others as them. That if all of the focus is on us, whoever us is, then it might be okay to define others somehow but that is just not the reality of how the world is. Maybe it was the lessons that I learned from my parents as I grew up, maybe it was the underlying tone of the post-nuclear, post-assassination, turbulent decade that framed my childhood years. Maybe it was the awesomeness of looking back from the moon. Whatever prompted it, I began to form this notion that we are all the same, just existing in different circumstances.

In the years that have followed I have tried to live my life based on that revelation. I have tried to live out the idea that we are all somehow the same and that there is no center that we have to be a part of. I have tried to carry through on this theory that there is no "who's in, who's out". What I have found, though, has been at times disappointing, especially when it comes to the church. "Us versus them" seems to be so entrenched in the Church that it might never get out. Maybe I didn't see it so much as a child, but as an adult the message has clearly come into focus.

In the Book of Acts, Luke tells a little about the struggles of the Early Church with this same "us versus them" dilemma. It seems that there were some non-Jews that wanted to be a part of the Jesus movement. Cornelius, a European man who believed in the Oneness of God and prayed constantly, had a vision which told him to send to Joppa to get Simon Peter to come visit him at Caesarea. In Joppa, Peter also had a vision. His vision consisted of a large sheet being lowered down from heaven by it's four corners. In the sheet were all kinds of four-footed creatures and birds and reptiles. A voice said to Peter, "Get up; kill and eat." He protested, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Three times this happened to Peter.

While Peter was trying to figure out the meaning of his vision, the men that Cornelius sent found their way to the house where Peter was staying. They explained their reason for being there, that Cornelius, a Gentile respected by the Jewish community, had a vision which convinced him to send for Peter to come to Ceasarea. Peter went even though it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with or even visit with a non-Jew. He went because "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." The visit ends up with the circumcised Jewish believers being astounded that the Holy Spirit comes upon these non-circumcised Europeans. As a result of God's message, Peter baptized the Gentiles saying, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?"

It would seem at first glance that the Church got off to a good start with Peter's willingness to include people different from him. It would seem like there was some kind of understanding, some explanation from God, that those already in the Church were not the center of the universe but only a small part of it. It would seem like the Church had early on gotten the message that there is no us and them, there is only we and that God will not allow the Church to define who's in and who's out. *Everyone* is in, seems to be God's message to Peter. "Nothing can be called profane or unclean." Everything created by God is clean."

But when Peter returned to Jerusalem to tell the others some were upset. "How can you visit and eat with unclean people," they argued. Peter explained his vision to them and they were silenced, at least for awhile. But no one from the Jerusalem Church seemed willing to go out among the Gentiles until finally Paul and Barnabas went. That caused such a ruckus that they called together a meeting of all of the Christian leaders. The Jerusalem Council eventually declared that Gentiles do not have to become Jews, which meant circumcision for the males, before becoming Christians. From that point on, the Church spread throughout Europe and gained members and momentum that brought us to today.

What is obvious, though, is that the Church never got over its claim to being the center of attention. It has always believed that it is the place to be, that those in the Church are in and those not are out. Paul later writes to the Church at Corinth about divisions within the Church. Some were saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas." Early on the Church had divided into cliques and Paul didn't like it.

Dr. Lewis Thomas of Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York suggests that cell fusion may be part of the original code, that which allowed human beings to evolve from the original primordial cell. If this is true, he thinks that such union may account for our tendency to form attachments to each other even now. "Cell fusion," Dr. Thomas says, "can be used as a metaphor for the way the whole place actually works; we live as the working parts of a planetary system of life in which the urge to join up together is the underlying driving force in nature."

We all want to belong to something. The "urge to join up together" is a very basic urge, the desire to belong so we're not alone. So, "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos" is not that unusual. Yet once we get together it seems like there is an equally basic urge to keep out others that are different. I don't know if that's part of Dr. Thomas' theory but it sure seems to me like experiential evidence suggests it. In the Church we have developed this "keeping out" mode into an art. We all want to belong to something but we each want something different to belong to.

On denominations within the Church, Frederick Buechner writes, "All the duplication of effort and waste of human resources. All the confusion about what The Church is, both within the ranks and without. All the counterproductive competition. All the unnecessarily empty pews and unnecessary expense. Then add to that picture the Roman Catholic Church, still more divided from the Protestant denominations than they are from each other, and by the time you're through, you don't know whether to burst into laughter or tears."

I suppose it makes me want to burst into tears. Where is the idea that we are not the center anymore? It seems like my childhood notion that we cannot decide who's in and who's out just hasn't gotten much attention when it comes to the Church.

I once read a statement, by Edmond W. Robb, Jr. a United Methodist evangelist and former chair of the conservative caucus "Good News", that if proponents of the "Re-Imagining Conference" do not uphold the basic doctrines of the church, "they ought to have the integrity to get out." They ought to have the integrity to get out?? How dare anyone claim to be so "in" that they can decide who's in and who's out!! It seems to me like there is a wide chasm between a vision that says "they ought to have the integrity to get out" and Peter's vision that "what God has made clean you must not call profane."

My experience with persons with intellectual disabilities has opened my eyes to the truth of the matter about just how exclusive the vision of the Church really is. I cannot tell you how often I have heard statements of exclusion, statements about who feels in and who feels out, from adults with intellectual disabilities. My friend Terrence said, "I want to belong to a place where people say hello when I walk in." Darcel has a specific need, "I just want to go to a church where I'm allowed to sing in the choir." That's pretty basic and the message can't be any clearer than that. These are people that are feeling excluded. They are feeling like they are on the outside of something which I just don't understand as having an inside and outside. Maybe society in general wants to feel that way, but I don't see how the Church possibly can. People with disabilities, physical, mental or emotional are systematically denied the ability to belong to the Church. Often times it is because of physical barriers that stop them at the door, more often it is because of attitudes that treat them as if they are different, in need of our patronizing assistance. And the excuses are amazing.

"We can't afford to make our church physically accessible, it costs so much." "Those people want to be together in their own church anyway." "We don't have any disabled people in our

church."

So why even try to belong to something that doesn't seem to want you anyway?

In his book, "Gay Theology Without Apology," Gary David Comstock writes about being gay and excluded from the Church. "Sometime ago," he writes, "I read an interview with a member of a gay Nazi organization. The interviewer asked whether belonging to such an organization was a contradiction, since Nazis persecuted gays. The man responded that it was not any more of a contradiction than identifying as a gay Christian." Yet many gay and lesbian people do want to be in the Church despite the Church's questionable treatment of sexuality issues. Or perhaps they want to be a part of the Church because of its part in marginalizing such a large constituency of God's children and they want to help bring about change.

Comstock writes that gay people often justify staying within the Church because it needs to be brought back to its primitive roots, its egalitarian and communitarian origins. "The church has simply gone astray from a basis, center, origin in a common carpenter who welcomed, included, and healed the broken, outcast, and the needy ... Those of us who find ourselves mostly at odds with and on the margins of the institutional and larger church often appeal to this basis."

Isn't the same true for any of us who have been marginalized by society, a marginalization that has often been perpetuated by the Church?

This past week at Camp Innabah confirmed for me once again that we all want to belong. During our evaluation process with the 20 young adult with intellectual disabilities and deafness the clearest point that they each made was that the interaction between deaf and hearing people all week was what meant the most to them. We interacted with soccer camp and night camp and day camp and the camp volunteer and professional staff. That was what made the

week for the campers that I was with. And I think it made a difference in the faith life of each person there this week. The vision of Jesus is not about a community where some are in and others are out. It simply can't be.

Where is the vision? Peter's vision is clear and he argued it before the First Century Church, a church which seemed to accept the fact that it had a mandate to be open to all. But that vision got lost somewhere among the centuries as the Church decided that it was the center of attention, the only place to be. The Church now seems to be hearing the argument that those who do not agree with the centuries that have passed must get out. It frightens me to imagine that the 21 Century Church might be settling into a doctrine of who's in, who's out.

My vision of 1969, a vision inspired by the moon, a vision of us no longer being the center, a vision which also includes us the Church, is not one that will be met by a who's in, who's out theology. It might be met by Peter's vision. What it will clearly be strengthened by is a future where our faith community does not expect to make everyone the same. Our individual churches and the larger Church need to be communities which "promise to be shaped by the particular needs and differences of its members, not to shape and reduce them to similarity. Such community promises welcome and nourishment for all who want and need to share their lives." (G.D. Comstock). It will be a community where there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white, disabled or not, gay or not.

To get there requires some kind of a new vision, a vision that requires a perspective from out there looking back rather than here looking out, a vision absent any separation based on who's in, who's out. It requires a vision which reveals that it is not up to us to decide who's in and who's out. Only with that kind of vision will the community finally be what Jesus envisioned, a place where those that once felt out will no longer remember how it felt.

To get to that new vision, or to reclaim Peter's vision, it will take an evangelism that calls everyone no matter who we think they might be. It will take churches and church facilities that are barrier free. It will take us to open ourselves to the power of a God who spoke to Peter, a God who speaks the same message to us today. It will take an openness that has no literal or figurative closed doors. Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors is our denomination's newest promotional campaign. Is it true?

This year, Annual Conferences all across the United Methodist Church are voting on several amendments which will change our constitution and some of the fundamental ways that we operate. Amendment I revises the current language in our Book of Discipline which now says that The United Methodist Church is open to all people regardless of "race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition." The new language is to read "all persons" – the United Methodist Church is open to "all persons." It has become known as the "all means all" amendment – and seems like it should be an easy vote, right? It has to pass by 2/3 of delegates across the Church voting in favor of it. While I haven't heard numbers from everywhere, in our Annual Conference the amendment passed by only a 55% to 45% ratio.

Can we reclaim Peter's vision and be what Jesus intended us to be? Can we be open to all, welcoming of all, be a place where all means all?

Only then will the Church be a community where someone can reach out and touch the hem of the healer's robe. Only then will it be a community where turning the other cheek is accepted rather than debated. Only then will it be a community where the peacemakers are truly blessed. Only then will it be a community where the little children can get close to the light. Only then will it be a community where a Samaritan can care for a Jew. Only then will it be a community where the table is open to all who want to be present. Only then will it be a community of faith.

Amen.