

**Sermon Notes:** May 5, 2024

**Focus:** Peter and Cornelius: who is in and out.

### Lectionary Readings

I love the part of Acts that we've been reading lately (Acts 8-11). We've got court officials who should be excluded from God's community, but get baptized. Further, we've got Peter opening his eyes to the holiness of a Roman military man. Both stories show outsiders becoming part of the exclusive, not really exclusive, Holy Spirit club. I want to spend most of my time on Peter and Cornelius, but also include Phillip and the Ethiopian because it underscores the relationship between inclusion and cultural division. On page 2, I want to explore some of the background that got Peter to even consider visiting Cornelius' household in the first place.

### **Phillip and the Ethiopian**

Last Sunday's reading (Acts 8:26-40) described Phillip encountering an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah. Phillip gave him such an effective book primer that the Ethiopian official said, "Look, here is water! What is to **prevent** (*kōlyei* | *κωλύει*) me from being baptized?"

A lot actually prevents him. Deuteronomy 23 was about who was "in" or "out" in the "assembly of the Lord." The assembly was where the Hebrews gathered for worship, teaching, and even where they made legal decisions. A eunuch is explicitly excluded in Deuteronomy 23:2 "No one whose \_\_\_ have been crushed or whose \_\_\_ has been cut off may come into the assembly of the LORD." Phillip's eagerness to baptize was a direct affront to covenant law and proper religious community. But this affront is exactly what the Holy Spirit was encouraging the fledgling Christian community to embrace.

### **Peter and Cornelius' house**

Today's reading is the culmination of the story where Peter changed his mind about Gentiles. In Acts 10, he has a vision of unclean animals coming down from a sheet in the sky where God tells him to kill and eat. The subtext is clear, clean and unclean food do not separate you from the Gentiles. So when he reluctantly visits Cornelius, a well-respected military leader, his change of heart is complete. "Can anyone **withhold** water so that these people cannot be baptized? (*kōlyesai* | *κωλύσα* similar to *prevent* ). Later he says, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us...who was I that I could **hinder** (*kōlyesai* | *κωλύσα*) God?" Nothing really restrains, withholds, hinders, or prevents the Holy Spirit calling all people into the New Assembly, the evolution of Deuteronomy 23.

## **How I see the movement of the Spirit unfolding**

### **The Outpouring:**

The Holy Spirit transforms Cornelius and his household before he meets Peter.

### **Peter's Realization:**

Despite Peter's initial sense that Jews and Gentiles should not be together, he knows a holy thing when he sees it.

### **Gentile Inclusion:**

These stories point to the way of Jesus as universal.

### **Baptism of the Gentiles:**

Cornelius and his household are baptized by Peter.

### **Witness to God's Sovereignty:**

Baptism is the sign of God's new assembly.

### **The Role of Faith:**

Cornelius "feared God and did what was right." Faithfulness is not about cultural background, but is the ground upon which the Holy Spirit shows up.

### **Unity in Diversity:**

Despite cultural, ethnic, and social differences, believers are bonded by their common experience of the Holy Spirit's power and new assembly.

### **Now for the lead up *before* baptism with Peter**

Peter had gotten so caught up in the culture wars of his day that he had a choice to make: 1. stay with the hospitality of a very low status Jew (a tanner - they stink literally), 2. go to the home of a high-status Gentile to share the Gospel. This choice revolved around food, which is code for cultural boundaries. The consequences of intimately associating with *any* gentile, and who you ate with, had consequences. Lots of Jewish Christ-followers were offended by Jews eating with "those" people. God had to smack Peter over the head with a vision of unclean food coming out of the sky to convince him to visit Cornelius (Gentile)

### **How afraid was he?**

You get hints of how afraid Peter had been before Cornelius. In Galatians 2, Paul brags about humiliating Peter for not being enlightened enough to treat Gentile and Jew the same at the dinner table. The water of baptism, especially in Cornelius' home, is a sign of the marriage between Gentile and Jewish spirituality. The Holy Spirit throws a big multicultural party at Pentecost (in two weeks).

**I hope** you are not too holy, too accomplished, too content to be impervious to change your mind. God is always in the business of resetting our tightly framed sense of who is good and who is bad. Nothing will prevent or hinder this. **Todd**