



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 26, 2014

"Crossing Boundaries" - Acts 10:1-44

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We continue our look at the books of Acts this morning, a history of the early church and the growth of Christianity. Last week Pastor Dan led a lesson on encouragement using Acts 9, and today we find ourselves in Acts 10 looking at first century Christianity and a divine meeting between the Apostle Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius.

Prior to the events described here in Acts 10, Christ followers were a relatively small group found mostly amongst the Jewish population in and around Palestine. After the events found in Acts 10, we'll see the small smoldering movement known as Christianity explode into a raging wildfire.

Wildfires are fires that burn out of control in wilderness areas. Wildfires differ from other fires because they spread rapidly, burn uncontrollably, change direction unexpectedly, and jump boundaries meant to stop them.

In my first summer out of high school I worked as a wild land firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service. As a young man, the thought of being a firefighter had a lot of appeal. It seemed like an exciting and glamorous job. But like a lot of things that look glamorous when you're young, it wasn't quite like I had imagined. I

imagined myself as a courageous firefighter, axe in hand, battling raging fires in tall pine forests, fighting back the destruction of fire, saving Bambi's home. It wasn't anything like that. It was mostly hot and dirty and I was thirsty a lot.

My official classroom training was focused on the basic concepts of fire fighting safety and fire behavior. Fire is a pretty simple concept, and our instructor taught these concepts using the fire triangle. The fire triangle is a simple graphic that represents the elements needed for fire to exist: oxygen, heat and fuel. If all of the elements are present, you have what's needed for fire. Remove one of the elements, and the fire goes out. Want to keep a small fire from becoming a raging inferno? Remove one of the elements.

Early Christianity was subject to a similar natural law, but instead of oxygen, heat, and fuel, it was Jesus, the Apostles, and the Holy Spirit. Had any one of those ingredients been eliminated or removed, Christianity may have ended up as nothing more than a footnote in first century history.

The established religious leaders of the day understood this concept, as we can see by their willingness to persecute and kill early believers to stop the spread

of Christianity. Just a few weeks ago we learned of Saul, who became Paul. Until his conversion, he was a Christian bounty hunter sent to round up and kill early believers.

It's pretty obvious to us now that these efforts to eradicate Christians and Christianity were not successful, but they could have been, if early Christians had not overcome their persecution and prejudice to tell others about Jesus.

Let's read today's scripture beginning at Acts 10.

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.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is cast in a favorable light here in this passage. He is seen as a man who prays to God. He's praying to the God of the Jews, one God, not the many gods Roman's were known for worshipping, and he gives to charity. Sounds like a pretty good guy. He is described as devout, prayerful and obedient, even though he is part of an occupying force meant to protect Roman interests and extinguish Jewish rebellion in the region.

We've seen centurions treated favorably in the Bible before. In Luke 7:4 we read of a Roman centurion sending Jewish elders to plead with Jesus to save the life of a slave. Scripture tells us about the centurion, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." Luke portrays this centurion as a good person, prayerful and obedient to God.

We continue at Acts 10:9:

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 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." **23a** Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

We can see a change in Peter already. Contrary to his closely held social, cultural and religious beliefs, Peter invites three Gentiles to be guests in the home where he's staying. This is highly unusual for Peter. His Jewish beliefs would have forbidden him from mingling with Gentiles. God is already at work in Peter's heart, moving him beyond his long-held belief that the Kingdom of God was meant only for Jews, to new

understanding. Peter doesn't comprehend all that's going on at this point, but he does act. Acting out of obedience he sets things in motion that will eventually change His own understanding of God, and the church, forever.

We continue in Acts 10:23:

23b The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. **24** The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. **25** As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. **26** But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

27 Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. **28** He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. **29** So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

In the first century, early followers of Jesus were wrestling with the question of who's in and who's out. Most Jews felt there were basically two groups of people: Jews and non-Jews. The non-Jews were known as Gentiles.

After Jesus, there were Jews who were followers of Jesus, and Jews who weren't followers of Jesus. The Jews who were followers of Jesus, were trying to convert other Jews to be followers of Jesus. But they were not interested in converting Gentiles to be followers of Jesus.

However, we see God working in Cornelius and Peter to affect a change, and we see God reveal to Peter that He isn't just interested in those who are in the "in-crowd," by sending him to the home of a Gentile.

Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor of Willow Creek Church, and author of "Just Walk Across The Room," a really helpful book about sharing the Gospel with others, says this, "My objective is to walk when He prompts me to walk, talk when He says to talk, fall silent when I'm at risk of saying too much, and stay put when He leads me to stay put."

Peter went, not because he understood why he had to go, but because he had been told to go. Peter was acting out of obedience, walking when he was told to walk, and speaking when he was told to speak.

I continue at verse 34:

34 *Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism* **35** *but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.* **36** *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*

39 *"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the*

people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."

44 *While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.*

What an amazing story of faith and obedience, and it draws to a wonderful conclusion: the sharing of the Gospel and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It's a fantastic story that reveals a great deal about God and His love for us.

First, it's an example of God's Sovereignty. The sovereignty of God is taught from the very first verse in the book of Genesis to the last verse in Revelation. Genesis 1:1 declares that in the beginning, God created all things in His sovereign power and authority, and here, we see God's sovereignty at work as He uses Cornelius and Peter to achieve His purpose to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles.

God will work through anyone he chooses to work through to accomplish His purposes. God doesn't need us to do what He wants done...He allows us to be part of what He is already doing. It's an expression of His sovereignty and His love for us that He chooses to use us at all.

Second, it shows God affirming obedience. Jesus called Peter to step out of the boat and walk across water in Matthew 14. It was a call to give up the security of the boat for the insecurity of walking on rough

water. With single-minded obedience, Peter takes the first step, and, when his foot doesn't sink into the water, his faith is affirmed. He affirms Peter again in this story by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as he shares the Gospel with a Gentile household.

For some of us, we may need to take that first step out onto the water, too, by being willing to share the Gospel with others. Maybe it's inviting someone to Sunday worship, or a healing service, or an Alpha course, or to a Christmas or Easter service. Maybe it's just telling someone what Jesus means in your life.

Third, it reveals that no one is beyond God's love. God moves Peter beyond his then culturally-biased view of people, to a new more compassionate view of people. He brings Peter face to face with people he would have inherently disliked. God wanted Peter to know that no one is beyond His love, and that He wants all to have an opportunity to come to faith in Jesus by hearing the implication of Jesus' death, and resurrection, for them personally.

This is something we can and should reflect on. Is there someone in our lives whom we think is beyond God's love? Someone we don't particularly like? Someone who holds different political or religious views? Someone of a different sexual orientation? Someone who roots for the wrong football team? Maybe someone who seems antagonistic towards Christians?

Is there something keeping us from fulfilling God's desire for us to reach everyone with His message?

The meeting of Cornelius and Peter was a turning point, the hinge on the door, or as Pastor Tim called it, the inflection point, in the history and growth of Christianity. Imagine where we might be today if Peter and Cornelius had not been faithful and obedient and moved as God asked them to move.

Here are some concepts that may be useful as we try to live out our faith in what has become a very non-Christian, secularized world.

First, we should always seek God. We need to seek for God through prayer, and by reading and reflecting on scripture. We should lead a life marked by a desire to know more about God, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We should be life long learners, devoted and dependent on prayer and on His Word.

In this story, prayer is the preface to God doing some amazing things. Peter and Cornelius exhibit a strong devotion to spending time with the Lord through prayer. Their commitment to prayer was what provided an opening for God to speak into their lives. Cornelius didn't know the meaning of Jesus death and resurrection, but he was a seeker, and God answered his seeking heart by sending Peter with His message of eternal salvation.

The time we spend in prayer, and in His Word, will help us hear God more clearly. It will help us know when He is speaking to us. If like me, you've ever asked yourself how to know the will of God for your life, this is the answer. God invites us to spend time with Him through His

word and through prayer. If we don't spend time with the Lord, we might miss out on some amazing plans He has in store for us. Peter and Cornelius had a dedicated prayer life, and so should we.

Second, be meek. In Greek, meek is defined as power under restraint, like a thoroughbred horse with a bit in its mouth. Meek is also defined as one who is quiet, gentle and submissive. To be submissive, or powerfully restrained, means to be obedient. Pastor Dan often reminds us that we need to know our Master and we need to be obedient to Him.

Peter, one of the most brash and willful men of the Bible, was obedient to God, and God used him to take the message of Jesus outside an enclave of Jewish society, to the ends of the earth.

Cornelius, a high-ranking Roman military official, could and likely did, kill people with his sword. Yet, he was a man of faith and humility who was seeking God. We may have great worldly power, too, but are we willing to humble ourselves and seek God?

Peter was by no means perfect, he often stumbled and fell short of what Jesus wanted from him. He denied Christ three times. Peter was impulsive, brash, quick tempered and sharp tongued, but I admire Peter for these inelegant traits. It gives me hope and assurance that God's faithfulness can overcome our unfaithfulness.

Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem says, "Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all," and if Peter had written a poem, he might have said, "It's

better to have followed Jesus and sometimes failed Him, then to fail to follow Jesus at all."

Third, be bold and speak.

There is power in the Gospel. Romans 10:17 says, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." It is a message of what God has done for us, out of pure grace, through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus.

Do you have a story of God's grace working in your life, or in the life of a friend or loved one? Have you been a witness to the power and love of Jesus? If so, you know the Gospel message and can speak about it, probably with more power than you realize.

God often nudges or invites us to talk to people about our faith, but we likely don't accept the invitation as often as we should, or for some of us, at all. It's easy because we're busy, right? We can disregard it, knowing there is surely someone else who will take care of it.

Someone once asked Emily Post, "What is the correct procedure when one is invited to the White House and has a previous engagement?" She answered, "An invitation to the White House is not an invitation, it's a command and automatically cancels any other engagement." We should consider an invitation to speak for the Lord a non-negotiable invitation, and accept it every time. Introducing someone to Jesus should be a high priority mission for us all.

Nick Vujcic, is a young man born absent all four of his extremities, that definitely has a story of grace.

He has no arms or legs, yet God uses him to share the message of Jesus with large and small audiences all over the world.

Nick says, "If God can use a man without arms and legs to be His hands and feet, then He will certainly use any willing heart!" Think about it. If Nick can walk across the room, and Peter can walk half way across Judea, doesn't it seem possible for us to take those steps and share the story of Grace in our lives with others?

If we know the message of the Gospel, but aren't sharing it, what's stopping us? Is it prejudice or fear? Is it inadequacies or ambivalence? What are the limbs of faith that we think we're missing? Is it because we never went to seminary? Peter didn't? Is it because we don't have enough education? Peter didn't.

This is another part of the story I can identify with. I'm a college drop out who started a small business with my family that eventually became very successful. I had no experience in the church, I knew nothing about ministry, and didn't know Jesus until I attended a Mens' Retreat in my late forties. I approached church and Christianity with a lot of reluctance, not because I didn't believe in God, but because I came from outside the church, didn't know Jesus, and was intimidated by it all.

Even after I became a Christian, I was uncomfortable sharing my faith. I thought there were professionals to deal with sharing the Gospel. That's what pastors are for, right? It took years before I felt comfortable enough share my faith with others. I'm

still uncomfortable with it in some situations. But once I came to know the real meaning of what Jesus did for me personally, and the depth of his love for me, sharing my faith and the message of the Gospel became an honor, not a duty. Where I was once uncomfortable and intimidated, I felt confident. Where I once felt ambivalent, I now felt deep responsibility and conviction. Over time, I became more obedient knowing God had prepared me, and was preparing someone for me, in advance.

So listen for an invitation from God to speak for Him. It may not be a loud invitation, but listen for it anyway. Listen for the slightest knock that may be God inviting you to join in on what He is already doing. Four soft knocks was all it took for Beethoven to write his most famous symphony. Beethoven's Symphony #5 came to him in the middle of the night as he heard repeated soft knocks on a neighbor's door. Beethoven's great symphony started out as a simple knock, and that soft knock you're hearing may be the beginning of a great work in you, too.

God knocked on Peter's door, and Peter answered a divine invitation that was the start of a wildfire that eventually swept across the world. He was invited to rethink his beliefs and to take a fresh look at how to reach the world of Christ.

Do we need to take a fresh look at how we think about others? Do you know someone who needs to hear the message of God's grace? God is inviting us to take part in the work He has already begun. He asks us, like He asked Peter some 2,000 years ago, to put away our pride or

prejudice and share the message of the Gospel with everyone—even those we may think are different.

Maybe you're feeling a little like Cornelius today: devout, prayerful, charitable, but just haven't come to know what Jesus means in your life. If so, you are in the right place and we would like to help you come to know Jesus in a personal way. I felt the same way not too many years ago. God knocked softly on my door, and maybe He is knocking on your's today, too.

But know this. God loves you. He loves you just as you are, wherever you are, and wants you to know the eternal meaning of what Jesus has done for you. And He wants to set you afire with His message and meaning of the Gospel so you'll share it with others. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:16.

That's the Good News. May you be set ablaze with God's message of love and grace, and be the wildfire that consumes the world for Him.

Amen? Amen.

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Note: Kirk Leavy is the Executive Coordinator at First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes or fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version: fpchkoolau@gmail.com