

**First Persons: Cornelius**  
**Acts 10: 1-23**  
**June 9, 2013 (Reconciling Sunday)**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

By and large, I'm not a parade person, but yesterday I slapped my clergy collar and my stole on and went down and joined probably 15 or so of our Metropolitan folks and over a hundred United Methodists, including 15 clergy, and our bishop to join in the Gay Pride Parade. It was a very powerful experience, in part because of the almost overwhelming response on the part of the crowd to seeing church folks in solidarity with GLBT folks and just cheering and people reaching out their hands to touch us. And I was holding the banner for a while and it's kind of crazy and chaotic, but I would see people's faces in the crowd who would mouth to me "thank you." Thank you for being here. It was a very compelling reminder of the importance of the decision that we all made as a community five years ago to become a reconciling congregation and to challenge our denomination's position on this issue.

## **II. Telling the Story**

We're in the middle of a series of sermons that I've called "First Persons" because we're looking at specific biblical narratives. This wonderful story of Cornelius is a great way to explore why this is such an important issue for us, and continues to be such a formative ministry for us in our church. This is really the story of how our church in its very earliest stages started to understand itself in a bigger way and started to understand the movement of God's spirit in a different sort of way. Cornelius, as you

heard, is not only a gentile, he's the first gentile to convert to Christianity in the Book of Acts. He's not only a gentile, he's a Roman; and he's not only a Roman, he's a Roman soldier; and he's not only a Roman soldier, he's a centurion which is a position of significant authority in the Roman army. He supervises a group of soldiers of between 80 and 100.

Centurions were significant figures in their day and were by and large well regarded and wealthier than average. Luke tells us about a centurion in the Gospel who has built a synagogue for the Jewish community in his town. And like that Roman centurion, Cornelius is referred to as a God-fearing man, which is Luke's way of saying that he was sympathetic to and supportive of the Jewish community without actually having been a Jewish convert.

So, Cornelius is a good man, a religious man seeking to be faithful. The story begins with him praying on his roof at the traditional Jewish time of prayer, 3:00. He receives a vision of this angel who tells him to seek out a man in Joppa whose name is Peter. Cornelius can't leave his post obviously, so he chooses a couple of servants and one of his soldiers who is off duty to go find Peter and bring him to Caesarea, which is the headquarters for the Roman presence in Judea. The next day, Peter is likewise at prayer when he receives a vision also, but one that's a little bit less clear. He's hungry so he's got food on his mind, and he sees essentially a picnic blanket dropped down with all kinds of food in it, both kosher and non-kosher, and a voice telling him to prepare the food. And he responds entirely appropriately - assuming this is a test - saying, "No, no, I never eat non-kosher food," and the voice tells him, "What God has declared clean do not call unclean."

Well, what does that mean? It's a little bit unclear. So, Peter is ruminating on this when the delegation from Cornelius arrives and says we're looking for Peter. Well, typically, in that day, when a centurion sends for you that's not a good thing. So Peter is not exactly sure how to respond, but the spirit says to him, "go because I've sent these people," and he goes. It's a long story and we only read a little piece of it for time constraints this morning, but the way the rest of the story unfolds is that Peter goes down to Caesarea and meets with Cornelius and his family. He realizes very quickly that Cornelius is ripe to hear the story of the good news of Jesus Christ. So he tells Cornelius. And Cornelius is quick to see this as the next stage in his spiritual pilgrimage, and he invites Peter to baptize him. Peter does that, and then there is this wonderful, what the biblical scholars call the gentile Pentecost when the Holy Spirit gets poured out on this group of new believers and they are speaking in tongues and receive the gift of the spirit, which is Peter's confirmation that this has been God's plan all along.

### **III. Lessons from Cornelius**

Now, as we reflect on the story in light of our commitment to be a reconciling church, I think there are a couple of helpful points for us to pay attention to in terms of what this means for who we are now and who God is calling us to be as we move forward. The first place to start, obviously, is Luke is very clear in stating that both pieces of this story begin with prayer. Cornelius is in prayer, and Peter is in prayer, and God uses both of those opportunities to lead one to the other. Now on some level that's obvious. It's worth noting, however, in this particular context because Peter's prayer leads him to a place that appears at least on the surface to be in direct contradiction to

what the Scriptural witness says as he understands it, both about kosher food and about not interacting, intermixing with the gentiles around him.

I think that's a helpful piece to bear in mind because while we reverence and understand Scripture to be authoritative, and it is an incredibly powerful gift reflecting a thousand years of our communities' interactions with God, we sometimes in the church put Scripture in even a more reverent position than we sometimes understand God to be. We fetishize Scripture a bit in terms of our understanding it to be sort of locked in stone. What this wonderful story of Cornelius tells us is Scripture is not God. God is God, and God is a living God and a present God and continues to move and act among us in this very moment. While Scripture is an enormously powerful and important dialogue partner, Scripture can never trump where the Holy Spirit moves us in this moment.

Scripture's purpose is to help us discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us in this moment. The story of Cornelius, and particularly Peter's piece of it, is a wonderful and beautiful exploration of how the authority of Scripture is in dialogue with our own spiritual life and journey. We start this discernment process as we need to start every discernment process, listening for what the word of God has to say to us.

The second piece that jumps out in this story is that Peter's revelation of where the spirit is leading was not a "Paul on the road to Damascus, brilliant light, knocked off your horse" kind of story. It's a story of an ongoing discernment process. Peter receives this revelation in his prayer time. He doesn't really understand that he's got to unpack it a bit. He's got to figure out what that means. He knows it means something, but it's only over the course of the next several days that he really figures out what God

is saying to him. So that he has this prayer experience and then that's immediately followed up by this delegation from Cornelius and he understands that to be part of the revelation process. And then he goes down to meet Cornelius and his family and he realizes that he is supposed to preach to them, even though they're gentiles. Not only does he preach to them, they want to be baptized into the faith; and then after the baptism, the Holy Spirit gets poured out on them. So Peter's understanding of where God is calling him unfolds at each stage in this journey.

I think that's helpful for us because what it says is our decision to become a reconciling congregation was just one piece of God's ongoing unfolding revelation to us, and that's going to continue to grow and unfold for us over the coming years. It took another important step forward a couple of years ago when D.C. passed the same sex marriage law that we then needed to incorporate into our understanding. So if we are reconciling in kind of theoretical principles, and now all of a sudden we can marry same sex couples, what does that mean for us? And of course we decided that we were going to commit ourselves to doing that as well.

#### **IV. We Can't Be Apologetic About That**

So what I'm telling you is that this journey isn't over for us and that we need to continue to process this together for where the spirit might be calling us. It also means that we are in a broader denomination and a broader Christian community that is highly conflicted over this issue, and that part of our call as a Metropolitan community is to witness to where we see the Holy Spirit moving and alive, just in the same way that Peter was called to witness to his experience. Because the way the story ends is that

after Peter is done with Cornelius, he gets called to Jerusalem and called on the carpet by the early church leaders to say, “what in the world were you thinking, eating and hanging out with gentiles?” And Peter then walks them through this revelation process so that his journey of discernment becomes the broader church’s journey of discernment. Our call as a Metropolitan community is to help our broader church continue its discernment of where the Holy Spirit is calling us to be.

I want to say parenthetically that Peter is a powerful model for us because Peter is completely unapologetic about this journey. He doesn’t react defensively. He doesn’t try to justify. He says, “I have had a new understanding from the Holy Spirit, and here’s how it came to me and here is what it means for me and here is what it means for us now.” I will share that sometimes, often, I find myself in dialogue with my brother and sister clergy on this issue who are not in the same place I am, and I find myself oddly apologetic, oddly trying to justify and unpack the Scriptures around homosexuality instead of being bold and saying, let’s worry about the Scriptures around homosexuality later, let’s talk about the scripture about Cornelius. Let’s look at all the places that the Holy Scripture is a story of God broadening who we understand ourselves to be, who we understand the community of faith to be, what we understand God to be about.

Which brings me to the last point - this story on a surface level is about the conversion of Cornelius, a gentile who becomes a believer, but it’s not really about Cornelius. It’s not really about the conversion of Cornelius. The real story in Acts 10 is about the conversion of Peter who starts to understand who he is and who the church is in a way that he couldn’t have before. When you look at the way Luke tells the story, Cornelius is the vehicle for Peter’s conversion to understand the church in a different

way, a way that was totally outside of the box that he brought. And what that means for us, dear friends, is our being a reconciling church is not about our wonderful broadmindedness in inviting our GLBT brothers and sisters into the bosom of our family.

What our being a reconciling church is about is about our GLBT brothers and sisters helping us to understand who God is in a different way and helping us to understand who we are as a family in a different way. It's God continuing to impart God's revelation to us as we grow and change as the body of Christ. This is about our discerning who we are and about the Holy Spirit saying maybe - just maybe - as smart and as talented as you all are, you don't understand quite everything about God and maybe even everything about what it means to be church, and here's an opportunity to learn a different way.

## **V. Conclusion**

There is an author and commentator named Andrew Solomon who I heard speak on one of the TEDTalks recently. He is gay, and he says in this talk, "In the same way that we need species diversity to ensure that the planet can go on, so we need diversity of affection and diversity of family in order to strengthen the ecosphere of kindness." I like that line: "In order to strengthen the ecosphere of kindness." So, our journey as a reconciling community is about our work to ensure the breadth and growth of an ecosphere of kindness, an environment in which God's spirit can move with ever greater and more transformative power as we create the space where love can happen. And we create the space within ourselves to understand that how we experience love may be different than the way somebody else experiences love, and that's okay. And that

God's call to us is a call to engage in an ongoing journey in which the circle keeps getting wider, and we continue in the process of becoming all that God has created us to be.

Amen.