

Faith Mennonite Church
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Stories of God's People: Cornelius and Peter Caesarea and Ferguson: Vision and Struggle

Acts 10

Cornelius and Peter. Theirs was an unlikely encounter. Geographically these two were only about 30 miles apart; Peter was in Joppa and Cornelius in Caesarea, both port towns on the Mediterranean Sea in Israel. If one were in good shape, you could walk this in a long day; and by horseback it would be a half-day journey.

But culturally and theologically, these two men would seem worlds apart. Cornelius was a centurion in the occupying Roman army, a Gentile. Peter, was one of the apostles, one who had been in the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, and now a leader in the emerging church.

The author Luke, provides some early hints that maybe this distance wasn't quite as far as it first appears. Luke describes Cornelius as a God-fearing man, who is praying at 3 p.m., a regular daily time of prayer for observant Jews, and he is a generous man, regularly giving alms. Not a Jew, but acts like a Jew.

Peter, meanwhile, has travelled away from Jerusalem first to Lydda and then to Joppa, where he is staying at the home of a tanner. Someone who was diligent in observing all of the Jewish purity laws probably wouldn't have lodged with a tanner since that person regularly worked with the skins of dead animals. So Peter, it would seem, was willing to blur some of the strict religious boundaries.

One thing these men shared in common was their regular prayer practice. First we meet Cornelius, at prayer, when he has a vision, which acknowledges his prayers and his deeds and directs him to send for one named Simon, or Peter, who is in Joppa. He immediately sends three men on their way, two servants and a soldier.

The next day, when these three are about to arrive, Peter is at prayer. He's hungry, which suggests he may have been fasting as well. Peter too has a vision, although his is a bit more elaborate. He has already sent for food to be prepared for the close of his prayer time, but he isn't at all prepared for the food that shows up in his vision. It comes to him on a sheet that drops out of thin air. Instead of food he would want to eat, it's filled with all of the "unclean" animals that Jews were forbidden to consume. He's puzzled when a voice in this vision instructs him to kill and eat. In typical, impulsive Peter style, he talks back: "Absolutely not! I've never eaten anything unclean!"

But the vision comes again and this time the voice says: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The vision returns a third time, in silence, with no further words.

The next words to be spoken come from the three messengers from Cornelius, who arrive asking for Peter. God speaks again, directing Peter to go and receive these guests. Upon hearing their introduction and the story of Cornelius' vision he invites them in and offers hospitality. The next day he goes with the men to Caesarea and enters the home of a Gentile.

When Peter's company arrives in Caesarea, Luke recounts Cornelius' story for the third time (which we omitted from our reading this morning). But Luke seemed to have a purpose in emphasizing three times that Cornelius is a God-fearing person who is honestly seeking God. Nevertheless, Cornelius' knowledge is incomplete and he bows in reverence at Peter's arrival, as if to worship him.

Peter quickly corrects him and establishes that he is just a human, who is also learning and growing in his own faith. And the very latest thing he has been learning is that God shows no partiality, that national origin makes no difference, that Jew and Gentile are becoming obsolete categories of separation. What matters now, after Jesus' death and resurrection, and this new movement of the Spirit of God, is one's sincere desire to follow Jesus, to be in communion with God.

Then, as if God might be worried that Peter hadn't yet fully grasped the entire message, God interrupts his sermon and the Spirit falls on this group of people gathered in Cornelius' house. They receive the ability to praise God in other languages, which was recognized as a sign of the Spirit. Peter

quickly acknowledges what is happening and offers to baptize the whole household. God has moved to bring these folks “in,” and Peter wants to honor that, seal it...a done deal.

This story in chapter 10 of Acts is the beginning of a five-chapter account of the work of the Spirit in opening the fledgling church to the inclusion of Gentiles without requiring them to first meet all the requirements of Judaism. This story makes it look like a smooth process, but the fact that Luke has Peter repeat it all over again, in the next chapter (11), when he returns to Jerusalem, suggests that it was a *process* that took time. And when we get to Chapter 15, in what is called the Council of Jerusalem, we find that it was a *struggle*, with strong leaders like Peter and Paul on one side arguing for inclusion, and the “elders” of Jerusalem, including James, the brother of Jesus, initially on the other side.

This story has been instructive for many in the church who have worked for greater welcome, respect, and inclusion of gay and lesbian persons, and for the recognition of their Spirit-filled gifts in the church. In the past several weeks as I have reflected on this story again, in the context of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, I have thought about how it also speaks into that reality and invites us to consider how we, and the wider church, can respond.

We live in a society that finds it very difficult to speak in honest and meaningful ways about race, about the history of slavery, about racial injustice that still exists, and about the privileges of the white majority. No one would argue that in some important ways things have improved in comparison to the 1950s. Our schools and work places are integrated. We have an African-American president. Here in our cities the superintendents of our schools are a black and a Latina woman.

But then, an unarmed black youth is killed by the police or by a white citizen who is later acquitted for “standing his ground.” Demonstrations in African-American communities that include angry voices, and at times turn violent, shatter our sense of improvement and accomplishment. At best these events leave us frustrated and concerned; at worst we feel guilty and paralyzed, and we observe the tendency by many in the majority communities to blame the victims and their communities. Polls show an incredible divide between black and white in how these events are interpreted.

What if we responded to the events in Ferguson and the demonstrations of the African American community there as an invitation in the manner of the one that Peter received when the envoys from Cornelius arrived? How might we travel to Caesarea to the home of Cornelius, the “other,” here in the Twin Cities, and listen to what God might break in and say to us there?

We can be sure that there are people of faith in the black churches across our cities praying fervently for justice, with a clear vision of what that would look like. Our first step in receiving the invitation, in the model of this story, is to be a people of prayer—of regular, daily, fervent, even fasting prayer, praying that “God’s will/God’s justice/God’s shalom be done on earth as in heaven.”

We may not receive the invitation in the way that Peter did, with folks tapping on our door and calling us by name, but like Peter, we can venture to a place that isn’t entirely comfortable, with the confidence that Elisabeth and Ramont Harder Schrock spoke of last Sunday, that God is always present and at work before we ever show up.

The most challenging part for any of us as we move into an unfamiliar place is to let God change our minds. We may or may not be privileged to a vivid vision, but we will only understand the very alive and very evil effects of racism in our community when we listen to the first hand stories of people who experience it every day.

Like Peter, our first response might be to push back and say, “Unh-uh, God, I cannot go there! This is too uncomfortable; I do not have the time or energy.” But God is the God of second—and third!—chances, as Peter is proof. Let us be confident that the Gospel is *always* good news, even when it takes us beyond our comfort and asks more of us than we think we can give.

Questions:

- 1) Do you have any friends or colleagues who are teachers for you about the reality of racism? What is one thing you have learned from them?
- 2) What one idea do you have for how you as an individual or we as a church might be guided by the Spirit to “go to Caesarea and meet Cornelius”?