

Acts 10, selected verses
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I Really Am Learning...

This morning we move to the book of Acts which shares the story of the church's earliest days beginning in Jerusalem with Pentecost after the Holy Spirit blows in with wind and fire and gives birth to the church. Peter, one of OG disciples takes the lead, preaching and telling the story of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection to anyone and everyone who will listen. Not everyone is terribly thrilled with what Peter has to say. The religious authorities are bewildered by the work and the words of Peter and the rest of these rough-around-the-edges apostles. After the stoning of Stephen, the persecution of the church intensifies in Jerusalem, so many of the leaders scatter into other regions still filled with the Holy Spirit, still compelled to share the good news. Fresh from hearing that Peter has raised a disciple named Tabitha from her death bed, we meet Cornelius, a Roman officer with 600 soldiers under his command. We are told that Cornelius and his entire household are Gentile God-fearers, people who worship the God of Israel but have not converted to Judaism. God comes to him in a vision, praises Cornelius' faithfulness, and urges him to send for Peter, and Cornelius does, sending a soldier and two servants to find Peter. [Read Acts 10: 9-20]

As I think you know, I am partial to Peter. I love his passion and his habit of talking too much. He always, always seems to have something to say, and he often winds up saying far more than he should, letting his words outpace his wisdom. He is stubborn in his faithfulness, really, really wanting to do everything just so. He is not polished or terribly tactful. In the chapters leading up to this one, we hear about Philip's baptizing an Ethiopian court official and

about Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on his way to persecute the church in Damascus. We are not necessarily surprised by God's everything everywhere all at once activity. Peter is. He is not all that startled by God's speaking to him in a vision. He is however thrown by that big sheet.

I get it. Peter is and has been faithful—for the most part—since his first encounter with Jesus. He has followed wherever God has called him to go. He has stood trial and he has preached to thousands. And all the while he has remained a dutiful and faithful Jew. Throughout scripture, God comes to people in dreams when their guard is down to invite them to imagine something new. Here, God speaks to Peter in another moment of vulnerability—when he is hungry. In the wilderness, Satan comes to Jesus after he has gone 40 days without food and tempts him to turn a stone into bread and feed himself. Jesus refuses, of course. Now God comes to Peter and encourages this hungry one to kill and eat. Peter responds as if it is a trick and he objects, not simply with a polite “no thank you” or “I’d rather not.” It's more along the lines of, "No way" or “Heck no” or "Not a chance." I like to think that I'd be convinced by a voice and a big sheet, but the writer of Acts tells us that Peter is bewildered and brooding.

[Read Acts 10: 21-33]

It's extraordinary, isn't it? God moves from big sheet to big tent in the blink of an eye. I hadn't noticed it before, but Peter is not fully on board when the visitors arrive on his doorstep, but God is undeterred. Peter's bewilderment and brooding are no match for this God who is determined to keep moving, keep including, keep expanding the bounds of this fledgling community. God forges ahead and expects Peter to catch up. [Read Acts 10: 34-48]

I think the key verse in this text is written at the top of your bulletin. After the whirlwind of the big sheet and the abrupt change in travel plans, I get the sense that Peter is still a bit bewildered. Maybe he is still brooding, but in the moment when he hears Cornelius's story, Peter understands all that is happening around him and through him in a new way. And then this one who has been at Jesus' side, this one whom Jesus has named the rock on which the church will be built, this one who has been on the ground floor of this fledgling community now declares: "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another."¹ *I really am learning*. Peter recognizes that he is not a fixed point, nor is the church. New can be scary. Expanding boundaries can be intimidating. "We have never done it this way before" can either be a stop sign or an on ramp. We have never done it this way before—and we will do anything we can to stop it. OR we have never done it this way before, and it's a bit intimidating, and we're excited to see what God has in mind. Scholar Will Willimon says it beautifully:

This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own....This does not mean an undisciplined flight of fancy into our own bold new ideas or the pitiful effort to catch the wind of the latest trend in the culture....Rather, it means that we are continuing to penetrate the significance of the scriptural witness that Jesus Christ is Lord and to be faithful to divine prodding. Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless

¹ Acts 10:34, Common English Bible

attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’²

Over the past few months René Prager, Julie Hill, and I have had the joy of walking alongside the confirmation class as they have asked and answered big questions about the life of faith. At the end of the class, they each wrote statements of faith talking about how they understand Jesus, the church, sin, forgiveness, community, and mission—among other things—in their own words. Each and every one of these young people was baptized in this church or another church where the congregation promised to help them grow in faith. Their statements reflect what they have learned here through you and us so far, as well as what they are hopefully still learning alongside all of us. These statements do not sound like the Apostles’ Creed, nor should they. These statements reveal these students’ understandings back to us and invite us to see the life of faith through their eyes. It has been a long time since I was in confirmation class. The world has changed. The challenges are different than they were in 1980-something. The church is different, too.

What does it mean to profess faith in God in a time of turmoil and divisions? What does it mean to declare that Jesus is Lord and Savior in a dominant culture that urges us to worship wealth, fame, misguided notions of perfection, and brute power? What does it mean to promise to follow Jesus as a disciple when there are so many other voices eager to train us in hatred and cruelty? What does it mean to covenant to be a part of the life of the church

² Will Willimon’s Acts Commentary, cited by the Rev. Jason Shannon

community when sports, friends, family, jobs, and school tug us in so many directions already? *I really am learning.* These young people are teaching me how it can be done.

In a few moments we will affirm our faith together using words the confirmands wrote. It is intimidating to write a statement of faith, especially when you know others will see it. As many of you have heard me say, this exercise is not about pinning down everything you have ever believed or will ever believe. It is instead a snapshot from a moment in time. We are not a fixed point, nor will we ever be a finished product this side of the grave. By God's grace, it is my hope that every one of us can say with Paul that we are still learning, whether we are nine months old or ninety-seven years young. I pray that together we will remain persistently curious and joyfully expectant as we wonder together what God is doing and where on earth God is going now. I cannot begin to imagine what we will learn next as God continues to draw us into this whirlwind of redemption in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.