

Never Say 'Never' To God

Acts 10:34-48

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on May 17, 2015]

I

When William Faulkner received the Nobel Prize for literature, he said,

“The only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself.”

Acts 10 is the marvelous story of Peter’s conflict within himself.

Everything is called into question:

his religious convictions,
his understanding of the Law;
even his vision of who God is.

So important is this story that Luke devotes 66 verses to it,
making it the longest narrative in the Book of Acts.

It is a defining moment for the early church,
so let’s dive into this marvelous story and see where it takes us.

II

Our story begins with two visions.

In the first vision, an angel comes to a Roman officer named Cornelius.

Cornelius was not Jewish, but apparently was a sincere seeker of God.

Luke says,

“He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.”

About three o'clock in the afternoon,

the traditional time for Jewish prayer,
 Cornelius sees an angel standing before him in dazzling white.

The angel calls him by name and tells him that God has heard his prayers and noted his alms.

Did you hear that?—**God heard his prayers.**

One of the more disturbing things ever said by a Christian minister was in 1980 when the Rev. Bailey Smith, at the time president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said,

“God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew" because only prayers offered in the name of Jesus receive God's attention.

I wonder if Bailey Smith ever realized what he said is completely contradicted by Acts 10.

This story teaches that not only does God hear the prayers of Jews,
 but God also hears the prayers of a pagan Roman officer.

God responds to Cornelius' prayers by sending an angel to deliver a message to him:

*Send men to Joppa to find Simon who is called Peter,
 who is staying with a tanner named Simon
 whose house is by the seaside at Joppa.*

Cornelius has no trouble understanding the message.

He simply has to do what the angel instructs.

He promptly calls for one of his most trusted soldiers and two of his slaves,
 explains to them what has happened,
 and sends them on their way to find Peter.

III

The second vision occurs the next day while the men are approaching Joppa.

Peter goes up on the roof at noon to pray and becomes hungry.

While the food is being prepared, he falls into a trance.

In his state of semi-consciousness, he sees a vision of the heavens opening and something like a large sheet coming down.

On it are all kinds of animals—
 four-footed creatures, reptiles, birds, and fish,
 although how fish can be on a sheet is not explained.

All were considered unclean according to the dietary laws found in the book of Leviticus.

Jewish people in the first century world faced tremendous pressures to forsake their faith, drop their peculiarities, and become good citizens of the Empire.

A little pork here,
 a pinch of incense to Caesar there,
 and pretty soon the Jewish faith would cease to exist.

We must not read this story from the safe vantage point of a majority religion where broad-mindedness and toleration cost the majority nothing.

Rather, read it as it was first heard—
 from the point of view of a tiny minority for whom a bit of pork,
 a pinch of incense,
 or a little intermarriage was a matter
 of life and death for the Jewish community.

Peter hears a voice saying, "Go to it, Peter—kill and eat."

He responds, "No way, Lord; I have never even tasted food that is not kosher."

Then the voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it: *"If God says it's okay, it's okay."*

Peter has a hard time figuring out what the vision means.

Even though the vision is repeated three times for emphasis, verse 17 says he was “greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen.”

Peter becomes so lost in thought—
 and evidently forgets how hungry he is—
 that he doesn't hear the three men from Cornelius knocking.

The Spirit has to nudge Peter (just as the Spirit nudged Philip in the story from two weeks ago):

*“Three men are here looking for you.
 Don't hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”*

Peter obeys, and taking some of the brothers with him,
 he and Cornelius' men take off for Caesarea the next day.

But he still does not know where he is going or why.

Baffled he is, but willing to be led.

Like Mary, the mother of the Lord, Peter could say,
 “I am the servant of the Lord.”

Disciples are those who say, *“Lord, I do not know where you are leading me, but here I am...send me.”*

IV

The next day they arrive at the house of Cornelius.

Peter finds the house full of relatives and guests,
 all eager to hear God's word from Peter.

Peter begins by setting the occasion in a proper context.

He explains to these Gentiles that he isn't supposed to be there.

"You yourselves know," he says, "that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile."

“Jews just don't do this—visit and relax with people of another race.

“But God has shown me that no race is better than any other.”
(The Message)

Cornelius explains about the vision of the angel that led him to invite Peter to his house.

Then Peter launches into one of the most important sermons ever preached.

God plays no favorites!

*It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—
if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open.*

*The Message God sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus
Christ everything is being put together again—well, he’s doing it
everywhere among everyone.* (The Message)

Then Peter goes on to explain the truth about Jesus—

how he went about doing good and healing those who were oppressed
of the devil...

how he was put to death on the cross...

how three days later God raised him up from death...

how his followers are called to proclaim him Lord of all,
the judge of both the living and the dead...

how all the prophets have witnessed to the truth of forgiveness
through his name.

Peter is really getting rolling,
the people are nodding and saying “Amen, preach it, Brother!”

Suddenly the most unexpected thing happens.

Right in the middle of Peter’s sermon, the Holy Spirit shows up.

trying to interpret what is happening.

If this happened today, Peter would most likely talk it over with his therapist.

I can imagine him telling his therapist about the vision and saying how upset he is, he doesn't know what to make of all the animals on the sheet.

And the therapist, being a sensitive and caring therapist, would ask,
 "I wonder, what do you think it means?"

Maybe Peter recalls Noah's ark:
 clean and unclean animals in the ark with Noah.

In fact, there are conflicting accounts in the book of Genesis—
 one insists only the clean animals were allowed on the ark;
 the other says the animals included both clean and unclean.

There is tension even in the scripture over who is in and who is out.

At the next session, "while Peter was still thinking about the vision," the therapist gently suggests that maybe the animals represent all the different kinds of people in the world.

But the key to Luke's argument seems to be the willingness to go to one another's houses.

Until we go to the house and break bread together,
 we are not really friends.

Until we are guests in the home of a black or Hispanic or Asian or gay person and have them as guests in our home,
 we are only tolerating them,
 not loving them.

After the third visit with the therapist, Peter finally grasps the meaning:
 he is to go to the house of Cornelius.

"God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

Preach it, Brother, preach it!

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

That’s it...tell it, Preacher!

And then the penultimate declaration:

“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?”

Amen, Brother.

Never say never when it comes to who God is willing to accept into the household of faith.

VI

My friends, we are invited to struggle, as Peter did, with the reality of God’s inclusive grace.

In this story, Peter discovers that an important part of his long-cherished system of beliefs is wrong.

What a shock that must have been to him.

Every day, Peter prayed the prayer from the Talmud which said,

“Oh God, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, that I am not a slave, and I thank you that I am not a woman.”

He falls asleep content and certain...all his categories neatly stacked.

Then comes that awful dream.

All his traditions,
 all his training,
 all his knowledge,
 beliefs,
 convictions,
 are not only questioned,

but abrogated.

His most cherished interpretation of the meaning of the Law is invalidated.

Yes, he struggles.

But guess what? God is present in such struggles because God has something new for us to learn.

Perhaps this was the only way God could penetrate Peter's petrified theology.

If God can't convince us in debate,
he comes to us in our dreams.

If the Holy Spirit can't reach us in our study,
she invades our sleep.

Sometimes our religious presuppositions keep us from God's newness.

We think the way we understand the Bible is the be-all, end-all.

We hold to long-cherished beliefs about...

who is in...
and who is out;
who is worthy of our compassion and fellowship...
and who is not.

We draw lines,

build barriers,
put up walls,
to determine who is acceptable
and who is not.

And all the while God is going about the business—

sometimes quietly,
sometimes noisily—
of erasing the lines,
removing the barriers,
breaking down the walls.

The poet Edwin Markham summed it all up in this marvelous bit of verse:

*He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.*

VII

In my humble non-Catholic opinion, this is the great gift Pope Francis is giving to the whole church—

Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—

indeed, a gift to the entire world:

a fresh vision of God’s inclusive grace that welcomes all persons.

Think of all the ways Francis has modeled this for us:

On Holy Thursday washing the feet not just of men but of young women and a Muslim;

Performing a wedding ceremony for 20 couples, some of whom were “living in sin;”

Embracing and comforting the sick and disfigured;

Inviting homeless men to have breakfast with him on his birthday;

Having showers for the homeless installed adjacent to the portico of St. Peter’s Square;

Baptizing the babies of women who had considered having abortions;

And saying of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters,

*“If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will,
who am I to judge?”*

It reminds me of what Peter says in verse 35:

“If you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open.”

Francis challenges all of us—

Protestant as well as Catholic—

to struggle with the issues of identity and boundaries.

How do we decide who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’?

Many times, certain cultural boundaries are imposed and baptized with religious language in an effort to keep out those with whom we disagree, or those who are different than we are.

The question each church and each denomination must answer is,
will we have the courage, like Peter, to reject traditional distinctions
made on the basis of religion or culture in favor of welcoming
everyone into God’s family?

The Presbyterian Church, USA recently made a decision about welcoming a
portion of God’s family—

specifically God’s gay and lesbian children living in committed,
mutually loving, long-term relationships.

Not everyone in the church is in favor of that decision,
and yet in good Presbyterian fashion we have agreed to disagree.

Language included in the amendment to the Book of Order stipulates that no
pastor is required to officiate, nor is any session required to provide space
for, any wedding that goes against the dictates of their conscience.

Several of you have expressed to me your discomfort with this decision.

I want to assure you that as long as I stand in this pulpit, everyone’s views
will be respected, and I will always encourage thoughtful and loving
dialogue within our fellowship.

If the story of Peter and Cornelius teaches us anything,

it is that our most closely held biblical interpretations,
cultural understandings,

and moral convictions might just be wrong.

In which case, we would do well to meditate on the words of theologian James McClendon, who wrote:

“Simply put, what we believe might be wrong. Or, of course, our adversaries could be wrong.”

With great humility and compassion Pope Francis is helping us see God and God’s redeeming grace in a new light.

That is what happens to Peter in the home of Cornelius.

He sees God in a new light,
and that enables him to see Cornelius in a new light.

Whether we are Protestant, Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, or whatever,
**when we see God in a new light,
we also see God’s people in a new light.**

VIII

Gracie Allen once said, “Never put a period where God places a comma.”

Never say ‘never’ when God gives you a vision.

That vision may send you to the last place on earth you expect to go
to see the last person you’d ever expect to see.

But, who knows?...

You just might find yourself a guest in the home of Cornelius.

Amen.

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