

**Acts 10:9-16, 19-20, 24-29a, 34-46a, 46b-48****"Conversion"**

Then Peter spoke up: "Today the Holy Spirit has fallen on all of these gathered here, just as it has on us. Can anyone withhold from these the water of baptism?" Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for some days...

You've heard the story before: how Peter dreamt of pigs in a blanket. How Cornelius and his family were baptized into the Church. But what does it mean?

For many of us Peter's dream is a New Testament escape clause appended to Old Testament Law – a convenient story that allows us to enjoy pork and sauerkraut on New Year's Day. For a queer audience it has often been used as a rebuttal to the Levitical injunctions against men lying with mankind as with women. But to use this passage as just one more weapon in our proof-texting debates misses the point.

I invite you to try to place yourself in Peter's context. As the Book of Acts has unfolded the Gospel has spread from the Apostles, to those they met on their way to daily prayer in the Temple, and then throughout the entire Jewish diaspora:

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11)...

All of these have returned to their homes throughout the known world after Pentecost with news of the crucified Jesus whom God has raised up and made Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36). It appears that Jesus' words recorded at the end of Luke's gospel have come true: repentance and forgiveness have been preached to all people, beginning in Jerusalem.

This has been a Jewish story about a Jewish messiah, spread to a primarily Jewish audience (Alison viii). And this Jewish story of good news has spread to the ends of the earth. Peter might at this point feel quite ready to sit back and relax...

But God, it appears, has other plans...

In the first-century world of Judaism there was a kind of hierarchy: you could be born Jewish. Or you could, as we've just heard in the Pentecost summary, convert to Judaism as a proselyte. Those who worshiped the God of Israel, but chose not to convert were known as "God fearers" (Huffman 494). These Gentiles could enter the outer courtyard of the Temple, but Greek and Latin inscriptions threatening death marked the line where their participation in Temple affairs ended (Huffman 494).

Enter Cornelius: Roman centurion, *God fearer*, representative of the oppressors, unclean Gentile... (Acts 10:22) a man who, for whatever reason, has not converted to Judaism.

Cornelius is sending summons for Peter. Peter accepts the invitation. Neither knows what will happen next – only that God has called them together.

Somewhere along the journey, Peter has made a connection between his dream and the events that are unfolding. When he meets Cornelius he blurts out: "You know it's unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

So far, so good...

But imagine Peter's surprise when he finds that Cornelius believes that the Lord has had Peter brought to Caesarea with something to say... And then it hits Peter:

"Oh, well listen... There was this man named Jesus, who came with a message of peace and spoke to the people of Israel. He turns out to be Lord of all. God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power. And Jesus used this great power to do good, healing the oppressed. God was truly with Jesus.

"But Jesus made too many waves. Jesus threatened to upset the order. So they killed Jesus in a most gruesome way, hanging him on a tree..."

Surely Cornelius would have understood the reference. Romans had crucified this Jesus – a punishment reserved for slaves and criminals, never practiced on Roman citizens or the upper classes (Donahue 298).

Peter continues his story: "But God raised Jesus from the dead. In fact, it appears that he actually *was* God in the flesh. And rather than seek vengeance on us, Jesus instead accepted us and loved us. I myself had denied him three times and yet Jesus didn't hold that against me. Instead of retribution, he offered a way out..."

And then it happened. Peter hadn't even finished telling the story when he was interrupted by an outburst of the Holy Spirit. These Gentiles were suddenly speaking in tongues and praising God – a scene that Peter had witnessed only once before...

The story we've been discussing is referred to by biblical commentators as "the conversion of Cornelius" (Matthews 203 New Testament). However, I submit to you that what has been unfolding here is something much larger. What we are witnessing is the conversion of *Peter*.

Peter has just experienced something that before now has seemed impossible: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto folks who didn't make the A-List. And the scriptures are clear: "Peter, and all

who came with him, were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles*" (Acts 10:45).

I invite you to take a moment and let that sink in. For those of us who've been raised in the Church, this story may be something we take for granted. But this is far from anything in Peter's experience: Gentiles, speaking in tongues and praising God. *The Holy Spirit has fallen on those Peter considered unclean.*

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English theologian James Alison points out that in Luke's account, Peter's transformation appears to be instantaneous (xi). However, things are rarely that simple. I suspect that instead this is only the beginning a process.

Up to this point Peter's been convinced that the Good News of Jesus is a drama focused on the Jews. This is the moment when Peter begins to understand that he and his people are not really the center of this drama at all. Instead, they are called to witness the unfolding truth of God's grace.

And these Gentiles, listening to Peter's story: they're not the ones who didn't make the A-List. They, too, are witnesses to the unfolding truth of God's grace. Something quite remarkable is happening: God is revealing that the story of salvation includes folks who don't fit the religious mold.

What Peter experienced on that day in a Gentile home is the same thing that is available to us right now. We've been raised to think that our received heritage and our culture are somehow incumbent on God. There's an A-List in our thoughts, and those who are like us are favored.

Then there are the others... Some folks are "E.G.R." – you know, *Extra Grace Required*. They show up in church or in class with "drama" and it sometimes feels like they won't be happy unless everyone plays their part.

Then there are those who have been called profane. Those who fall outside of what we feel is acceptable... well, they can sometimes enter the outer courtyard of our worship, but inscriptions warn them to straighten up and act right.

Oh... you can sing in the choir, or play the organ for us... but please don't tell us about your *lifestyle*... or your personal relationships... And don't for a second think that you can teach our children... The silence becomes its own form of death...

And yet, God is still in the business of transforming us all, expanding our boundaries, calling us to understand that the story of salvation includes folks that don't fit our religious mold. God's imperative to us remains the same as it was for Peter: *What God has made clean, we must not call profane.*

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Today the Holy Spirit has fallen on all of us gathered here. It's true: we haven't always made the A-List. Some of us have been called profane. Some of us have assumed that the Good News about Jesus is a drama that is focused on us. Our own Christian identity may have gotten in the way of understanding the larger narrative in which we are but a part. We're not really the center of the drama at all.

I invite you to rise as you are able and join us in a song of celebration. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of those gathered at Cornelius's home: crying out and praising God. We too are all called to witness to the unfolding truth of God's grace.

Works Cited

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