

## **The Holy Spirit Comes to Cornelius**

Acts 10 by Patty Friesen (July 8/18)

How lovely to have our Cornelius read the part of Cornelius in Acts 10. In the Book of Acts, these past weeks since Pentecost, we have seen the Holy Spirit working in amazing ways by forming an egalitarian community that worshipped in homes. We have seen dramatic conversion of Apostle Paul and dramatic healing and the raising of Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead. Today is another benchmark work of the Spirit in filling the Gentiles, leading to their baptism and inclusion in God's people.

The story of Cornelius and the Gentiles of Caesarea is a wonderful parallel to the Old Testament story of Jonah that we heard last summer at our Sunday School picnic by Ryan Siemens. Jonah reluctantly received a call to take the word of God from Joppa to Gentile Ninevah. Peter is commissioned by the same God to carry the gospel from this same Joppa north to the home of Gentile Cornelius in Caesarea in Samaria. This is also where Jesus found receptive hearts in the Samaritan woman and her community.

When Peter declares Jesus is the Messiah in Matthew 16:17, Jesus calls him Peter, son of Jonah. And indeed, whether Peter's real father's name is Jonah or not, he is called by Jesus into the same ministry of carrying the word from Joppa to the Gentiles. After Jonah protests his call, he spends three days in the belly of the whale and after Peter's protest, God calls him three times to go to Caesarea. Jonah's mission leads to the Ninevites repentance and Peter's mission leads to Cornelius' repentance and baptism. In both stories, there is a reaction from traditional Israel about the inclusion of these unclean Gentiles but God has the final say about who is clean and becomes the God of the Gentiles as well.

Cornelius is a Roman, a centurion, meaning he is a military commander over an army of a hundred, in charge of crucifixions as his cohort was at Gethsemane. The centurion at Jesus' crucifixion had a heart change and believed and we see Cornelius is already a devout man, who feared God, gave alms generously and prayed constantly to God. God is already present in his life before he even meets Peter. This happens often in Acts, that God is already present before the apostles bring the gospel. This is fascinating because we assume God has only been working in Israel - those are the only God stories we know about but here we realize God has found ways to be known outside of the known canon, outside the bible context and outside traditional Jewish religion. This is a humble reminder for the apostles that they do not have the corner on knowing God but they can augment Gentile understanding of God with additional understanding of the Jesus story and of the power of the Holy Spirit.

This already known God is a similar description of Lydia, the businesswoman in Acts 16 who is also a Roman but a God believer as she meets with the other women of Philippi for prayer by the river. We will hear her baptism story in two weeks when we celebrate Katherine's baptism. We will wear purple in honour of Lydia and her baptism as we celebrate Katherine and her baptism on July 22. This is such an exciting series in Acts but before I get too much ahead of myself, let's go back to Cornelius. He is in constant prayer which in Acts 1 set the stage for the coming of the Holy Spirit and at 3:00 in the afternoon, he has a vision of men coming to him. 3:00 is the hour of prayer among in the faithful in Israel, in the middle of the afternoon when shops are closed so all can see what's going on. It is at this hour that Jesus died, and the hour of prayer which Peter and John observed when they healed the lame man.

At the same time in Joppa, Peter is praying on the rooftop of the home of Simon the Tanner, already an unclean place because Jews were not to be around animal blood. So already Peter is crossing a religious cultural barrier to stay at his friend's place. Perhaps because he is surrounded by the sight and smell of animal skins, and because it is noon and he is hungry, he has a dream about unclean animals! He receives the vision of the sheet of unclean animals coming from heaven that God now declares clean. These tandem visions are the same as Saul and Ananias' visions of each other in Acts 9 where God brings them together in a powerful moment of conversion.

Weirdly, Patrick and I occasionally have parallel dreams. He'll wake up and say, I had a weird dream about our former home in Minneapolis, and I'll say, I dreamed about Minneapolis as well. In dream interpretation, anything that represents two, like a wedding or double digits particularly 1-1, mean that it is something to be paid attention to. God is trying to get our attention twice.

Today's tandem visions is a powerful moment of conversion - for Cornelius, but also for Peter - his worldview of Gentiles is turned upside down but he is in a position to handle this life-changing vision because he is in an open, prayerful position to receive it. It is people's quiet prayerful times that crack open visions and new movements in their lives. It is as if our quiet times with God help us get into a flow that others are also stepping into and the flow can draw them together in amazing transforming ways.

Peter goes with Cornelius' servants and upon meeting Cornelius, Cornelius falls at his feet. It's a natural response to someone he believes carries a divine word but Peter has always denied attention to himself, pointing past himself to God who is the

originator of these dreams and meetings. Between them, they share a premonition that a religious revolution is about to take place. Peter begins with his own conversion experience, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean."

This is a powerful moment of Peter's own humility and vulnerability and confession - that he too needed conversion. Imagine if all our community engagement efforts began with our own humble confessions of needing help before we try to help anyone else! This humility and vulnerability create an open space and trust between these strangers which leads to Cornelius and his whole household's open response to Peter's message, their infilling of the Holy Spirit, a sort of Gentile Pentecost with speaking in tongues and extolling God. Similar to the Pentecost in Jerusalem that amazed observers, the circumcised believers who were with Peter were amazed that the Holy Spirit came to the Gentiles as well, saying "These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." This common ground religious experience seals their acceptance and belonging in the people of God.

We cannot begin to truly comprehend what an earth shattering revelation this religious cultural shift is for the early church. Cornelius is the enemy in every sense - he is Roman, he is army, he is uncircumcised. He is the least likely person to be in tune with God. It stretches even my 21st century prejudices to imagine God's intimate relationship with one of our so called enemies - perhaps the equivalent would be the conversion of the guy who drove into the crowd in downtown Toronto or the conversion of school shooters whom God chooses to fill with the Holy Spirit - the least likely people. Acts is full of conversions of all kinds and reminds us all of our own continual need for

conversion - not as a single time event in our turning to Christ but our continual turning to all of the Spirit's calls and promptings for us to follow Jesus.

In his book *Soul Survivor*, Philip Yancey describes all the books he ever read that changed his mind about something. Books, service experience, experiences in nature are all ways God chooses to speak to us and move us in a new way. I have had numerous conversions in my life since my baptism at age 15. When I went to Canadian Mennonite University, I became converted to God's call to women and to strong feminine images in scripture. In seminary, I became converted to God's inclusion to my gay friends and colleagues. Moving to Saskatchewan 10 years ago, I was converted to eating and shopping local - to supporting local farmers, artists and businesses. Since working at Rosthern Mennonite Nursing Home, I've been converted to the best spiritual care possible for elders. Since visiting Muskeg Lake First Nation, I'm being converted to awareness and work in indigenous/settler relations. Who knows what God wants me to dream about and convert towards next?

Acts seems to set our religious experiences, visions and new revelations alongside the written word as the source of divine revelation. May the Holy Spirit and the story of Cornelius teach us humility and openness to the mysterious inclusive ways of God that lead us in ways we would not choose to go, that lead us to our own conversion of heart and mind.

Let us pray...