

“Now I Know”

Acts 10:1-34

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This is one of the great turning points in the history of the church — the first time a Gentile is welcomed into the fellowship of believers. This is the moment when we, sitting here thousands of years later, enter into the story of the Acts of the Apostles, which we’ve been retelling these past few weeks. Gentiles were people who no longer believed in the gods of Greek polytheism, but instead came to believe in the one Creator God worshipped by the Jews; yet they didn’t convert to Judaism. Such persons became known as God-fearers. Cornelius, a Roman army officer, was one of them. A devout man evident by his generosity to others and his life of prayer, Cornelius may not have had much use for organized religion, but he was a man seeking after the heart of God. And as much as Cornelius was seeking after God, even more, it turns out, God was seeking after him.

While praying, he receives an order from on high to send some of his men to Joppa to a man called Simon, also known as Peter. Because Cornelius had learned to pay attention to the still small voice, he did what the Holy Spirit told him to do without knowing the motive behind the Spirit’s command. Which is when the drama abruptly shifts to Peter, faithfully in prayer on the rooftop at that same hour. God’s plan is to have Cornelius welcomed into the fellowship of believers, but in order for that to happen it appears Peter has to learn yet another lesson about the true nature of his faith as a follower of Jesus.

Like all faithful Jews, Peter believed that Gentiles were outsiders from whom he was to keep his distance. But like Cornelius, Peter was also a devout man of prayer who had learned how to listen to the still small voice of the Spirit. While praying, Peter receives a vision, though this one is much more graphic and a lot more puzzling than the seemingly clear command Cornelius received. Yet, I think Peter’s vision is a lot more typical of the visions and messages we receive when we pray. Most of us don’t get loud and clear directions like “send two men to Joppa.” Most of us don’t see burning bushes like Moses, nor are we, like Paul, jolted by a blinding light while walking down the road. The visions we receive most often come as they did with Peter, from out of our own well of feelings and the things that appear in our immediate visual field.

Peter was hungry and the Spirit used those feelings of physical hunger to reveal God’s desire and will for Peter. He sees a meal set before him. Not just any meal, but a variety of forbidden foods. When the Voice invites him to eat, Peter rightly answers, “I have never eaten anything that is profane and unclean.” But three times (lest Peter miss the point), the Spirit says, “What God has made clean you must not call profane.”

While he’s still puzzling over what that vision meant, Peter hears a knock at the front door and two men from Joppa arrive. Rather than receiving a full interpretation of the vision he has received, the Spirit simply nudges Peter to open the door and invite these two strangers inside. Peter has felt those nudges before and he has learned to pay attention to them. Like Cornelius,

he too simply does what he is told while being utterly perplexed by what is happening around him. Therein is our first reminder — our opportunities for ministry come between spending time on the rooftop and answering the knocks at our doors. Only when Peter arrives at Cornelius' house does he learn that this whole strange encounter has been arranged by the Holy Spirit, who then reveals the meaning of his vision. Peter, who would never have stepped foot inside the house of a Gentile, finds that's exactly what God was calling him to do, teaching him "what God has made clean he must not call profane." "Now I know," Peter exclaims. God shows no partiality, but there are God-fearers in all peoples, in all places.

Through this Spirit-arranged encounter, Peter's vision of faithfulness to God and to the covenant of Israel expanded as he heard a new word from God and believed in that new word: A word that revealed God's radically inclusive love extends to the Gentiles and to all those who seek after the heart of love. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit was at work through that early community of faith, transgressing all human boundaries that sort, separate, and divide. Creating those intimate spaces in which relationships are formed between people who were not, nor should not have been, joined together. That is the same new word for the church today. God is calling to us, we who are inside the house of God perplexed at what the Spirit might be doing in our midst, to accept people we could never imagine God would send to our doorsteps and invite them into our life together.

In his book "A New Kind of Christianity," Brian McLaren reminds us that "Jesus didn't come to start a new religion to replace Judaism and all other religions whether by the pen, the pulpit, the sword or the apocalypse. Instead, Jesus came to announce a new kingdom, a new way of life, a new way of peace that carried good news to all people of every religion. A new kingdom is much bigger than a new religion. The good news of the gospel is about God's desire to reconcile all people with God and with one another."

We engage with people of other faiths or those of no faith who are seeking the hope we have found — the only way we can as fellow God-fearers who have come to know and understand and to love God through our own personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Remembering, like Peter and Cornelius, we might just find that hearing about someone else's religious experience might deepen our own.

God's call comes to us as we spend time on the rooftop and then answer the knock at the door.