

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor William R. White

March 7, 2010 – Third Sunday of Lent

The Spreading Flame Series

Bethel Lutheran Church

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org



The Sermon Text — Acts 10:1-35

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is 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. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.' Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

SERMON – Peter & Cornelius

Last week we read the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Struck down by a blinding light on the road to Damascus Saul needed to lose his sight before he could see. The man who viewed the followers of Jesus as his enemies now claimed them as his friends. He moved from

persecution to proclamation, from opponent of the work of Christ to ardent advocate. It was an amazing conversion.

Acts is full of conversions. And it is not just one conversion per person, which leads us to the story that we are going to consider today.

Peter was in Joppa, a city along the southern coast of Israel, where he had just been involved in the healing of Tabitha, whose Greek name was Dorcas. They believed she was dead, but after praying for her, Tabitha began to walk around. This healing caused many people to believe in Jesus, and Peter decided to stay longer in Joppa at the home of Simon, who was a tanner.

Meanwhile, up the coast, near the northern border, in Caesarea, Cornelius, a Roman officer, had converted from belief in many gods (polytheism) to a belief in one God (monotheism). He prayed daily and he gave generously to the Jewish synagogue.

One day as he was praying he saw a man in dazzling white who addressed him and told him to send people to Joppa and bring back a man known as Simon Peter. Cornelius did exactly as he was told, and immediately three men set out for Joppa.

A day later Peter, in Joppa, went up around noon to pray on the roof of Simon's house while others prepared lunch. As he began to pray he became drowsy, and fell asleep. He immediately began to dream. In his vivid dream a huge blanket filled with four footed animals, birds and reptiles was lowered from the heavens by ropes on the four corners. Then he heard a voice say, "Peter, kill and eat."

Peter quickly responded, "Lord, I've never eaten anything that isn't kosher."

The voice responded: "If God says it is kosher, it's kosher."

This was repeated, a total of three times. The repetition of the dream meant that the dream was set, and Peter should pay close attention to it. Then Peter awoke and while still in his dream state he heard the voice of God say, "Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Go down, join them and go to Caesarea with them. Don't ask any questions."

Peter did as the voice demanded, and he immediately went downstairs where he met the men sent by Cornelius. He and some of the believers from Joppa started their journey to Caesarea this next morning. When they completed the journey they found Cornelius waiting for them. He asked Cornelius why he had sent for him. Cornelius told him his story, and how the man in dazzling white had talked to him.

Peter was amazed and said, "It's becoming clear to me that God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from – if you want God and are ready for God, the door is open. What he once gave to Israel he is now giving to everyone, everywhere."

Suddenly the Roman citizens and the Jewish citizens were praying together. It was clear that the Holy Spirit was present. When Peter announced that he would baptize those who wanted to, many stepped forward.

It is hard for us to realize what a big step this was. Christians were discovering for the first time that they were not just reformed Jews. All of their assumptions about what it meant to be Jewish were being challenged every day. In another story we learned that Philip taught a black man from Ethiopia, a high government official who asked, "What would prevent me from being baptized." This man listened to the good news of God and said, "It sounds like it is for people like me." It was. Philip baptized him on the spot.

Most people would have reacted to the Ethiopian official by saying, "Yes, but..." Yes, but you are black. Yes, but you are from Africa and you don't have a Jewish background. But as Peter discovered, God doesn't play favorites. God was doing something different. God was making sons and daughters out of every nation on the face of the earth.

Peter was breaking some major rules in this story. First, Peter entered into the home of Cornelius even though Jews were not allowed to enter into the home of non-Jewish persons. The Roman house was not clean in the eyes of Jews. They did not prepare their food in the proper or clean manner. Still, God told Peter to go into the home of Cornelius. He told him to eat food that was not kosher. Peter, to his credit, did what he was told and discovered that he didn't have to bring the Holy Spirit to these people, the Holy Spirit was already there. If the Romans had already had an experience of the Spirit, it was time to baptize them.

This is a conversion story, right? But, who is converted in this story? Cornelius or Peter? The answer is: both, and both were converted for at least the second time. Cornelius, who once bought into the many-Roman-god theory changed when he heard about one God. He converted to the Jewish faith. Next, he was ready to take another step. One conversion was not enough. He was ready for a second conversion, from being a Jew to a Christian.

Peter was also converted, for at least the second time. Peter, the man who denied Jesus three times, stood in front of the crowd at Pentecost and proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God. When they ordered him to quit preaching or go to jail, he said: I can't quit telling about Jesus. His was a conversion from fear to faith, from cowardice to bravery.

But one conversion wasn't enough. He still thought that Jesus was the exclusive property of Jewish people. He still thought that God preferred Jews to everyone else. He still thought non-Jews were unclean. He still didn't believe that the command to preach and teach to "All nations" included non-Jews.

Do you remember the story of Jonah? God sent Jonah to preach to the non-Jewish people of Nineveh. Jonah didn't like the people of Nineveh and tried to run away. Though he headed for Spain, he ended up being thrown into the sea where he was swallowed by a large fish. While in the belly of the fish he rethought his options – stay in the fish or preach to the people of Nineveh. Somehow preaching seemed more attractive. The fish deposited him on shore and he not only preached to the people in Nineveh

he discovered that they believed him and repented. Jonah, unlike most preachers I know, didn't want them to believe him.

When they repented God decided not to destroy them. Jonah sulked. God sent a plant to provide shade for a day, and then the shade bearing plant died and Jonah sulked again. God told him, "You got upset when that plant died. Don't you think I get upset when there is 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left?" God had been trying to tell Jewish people for years that he loved everyone, but they refused to listen. This time he got Peter's attention. Peter needed to be converted in order to hear God.

I've experienced a number of conversions in my lifetime. I don't think conversion is too strong a word. In college I was converted from thinking Christianity was about not doing things – not drinking, not smoking, not playing cards dancing or going to movies, to living by grace and loving all of God's people. It is a conversion that needs renewing over and over again.

Following my Junior Year in college I went to work for East Harlem Protestant Parish at one of their summer camps. I was there to help Puerto Rican and Black kids from East Harlem and the Lower East Side of New York. As you have probably guessed I learned at least as much as I taught. Among the many things I learned was that there are lots of ways to love Jesus, not just the way I did in Viroqua.

I was converted in Seminary when the woman who would be the first to be ordained in the ALC began to attend classes. I had given very little thought to who should be pastors and who should not. I watched, and worked with women pastors over and over again. Now, when people from churches that don't ordain woman say to me, "Do you really believe in ordaining women?" I answer, "Believe it? I've seen it!"

Do you note that in this story it isn't so much about Peter making a decision for God and God teaching Peter. We often talk about how "I accepted Jesus as my Savior," or "how I took Jesus into my heart." There is not a lot of that kind of talk in this story. It isn't about what Peter did, but about how the Holy Spirit changed Peter. It is about God shaking the Jewish people until they finally get it – this is about God loving everyone.

Peter said: I finally get it. God is not excluding anyone. Faith is not just for people with money. It is not just for people who look and talk like me. God has sent the Spirit into the world to make all people sons and daughters of the king. Jesus is not the exclusive party of any one group. God chooses us regardless of gender, age, race, income or anything else.

That is why we have some work to do. That is why we are still one or two conversions short of maturity. Let's pray that the Holy Spirit reaches us and let's serve God with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our strength. Amen. © 2010