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Good News For All – Acts 10:23-48**

I like to people watch. And often as I sit in some public place and just watch people I like to ask myself what Christianity has to offer various people.

So I see a guy sitting on a bench waiting for a bus. He looks pretty worn. His pants have holes in them and he is holding a brown bag with a bottle in it. Some kids walk by him and they stare, but they don't make eye contact. Then they laugh with each other after they have passed.

Or I see a couple sitting together having dinner and by all estimates they look happy, they have nice clothes, their kids are cute and not screaming more than would be expected. I watch as they go outside and get into their nice vehicle and drive away content.

Or the other day in the bank while I was waiting to speak with someone I watched a middle-aged man in a nice suit talk with other employees of the bank. He was confident and firm, yet still kind and easy to listen to.

And all these people very well may already hang out with God regularly, but as I think through how what I believe applies to them, I pretend they don't. **How does my understanding of God, history and this book apply to them?**

Now we are often quick to say, well they need eternal life and forgiveness and everyone does. So it applies to them because we have something they need.

And I don't disagree that is true, but the question I repeatedly ask myself is what does Christianity have to offer these various people . . . in language they could hear and understand. Eternal life and forgiveness are our words, they are insider words that we have learned . . . but I don't think most of the people I watch think much about them.

Sometimes I feel like the water boy to a world full of Gatorade drinkers. And as I step forward to share what I have . . . I hear, "well that does not taste good." "I don't want that." "Gatorade is the ultimate

hydrator, it is the perfect combination of electrolytes and carbohydrates.” “And to boot, Gatorade is optimal for rapid fluid and energy delivery into the body so you can keep going strong.”

And then I read a passage like the one we have today and I imagine how crazy we are to believe this stuff. And how I wonder what someone hearing this story for the first time might think.

Let’s look at this story of Peter and Cornelius. It spans a couple chapters in the book of Acts, which as we mentioned last week, is a continuation of the book of Luke, also written by Luke. And so since this story gets so much time and multiple retellings, **Luke must have thought it was important.** So it is crazy, but really important crazy.

This story takes place after Jesus has resurrected and ascended into heaven. And there begins to be a discussion amongst the early followers of Jesus about who the message of Jesus is for. After all, the faith of Jesus is Jewish. Jesus was a Jew. Nearly all of Jesus’ early followers are Jews and Peter and the other early leaders spent most of their time talking with Jews about how their Messiah had finally come in Jesus.

But God pairs Peter with a guy named Cornelius through some interesting events and Peter’s understanding of who the Gospel is for changes.

I mentioned that this passage is really long so we are not going to read the whole story, but just a part of it, so I need to introduce where we are going to jump in the story.

Luke, the writer of Acts, begins by describing Cornelius in Chapter 10. He tells us that Cornelius is a centurion, an officer in the Roman army. He is not a Jew. But then Luke tells us in verse 2, **“he (Cornelius) and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.”**

Cornelius was a good-guy, but he did not know Jesus. But one day Cornelius has a vision and in this vision God tells Cornelius to send some men to go get a man named Peter. God tells Cornelius where Peter is staying and sends some men off to go and find him and bring him back.

As the men Cornelius sends are approaching where Peter is at, Luke starts to tell us about Peter. Peter has gone up onto a roof to pray when he falls into a trance and sees **“heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”** (Dana loves this passage)

And Peter says in his dream, I can't eat any of that, it is impure and unclean. Peter is a Jew and the Jewish dietary laws in Leviticus clearly say that Peter cannot eat these things. (Leviticus 11).

But God says to Peter, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”**

Just as Peter was trying to figure out what in the world this vision meant, those guys that Cornelius sent to find him showed up. Hmm. Coincidence . . . I think not. The men tell Peter about Cornelius' vision and Peter agrees to go back with them. So this is where we are at in the story when the part of the passage I am going to read picks up. It's longer so hang in there.

Read Acts 10:23-48.

We see nearly immediately in our passage that Peter has figured out the point of the sheet from heaven and all the animals in it . . . Peter says, **“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.”**

As Peter finally makes contact with Cornelius, Cornelius explains to Peter his vision and why he sent for Peter. Later on in chapter 11 as the story is retold again, it is said that Cornelius sent for Peter because he was told that Peter would bring him **“a message through which [he] and all [of his] household will be saved.”**

And now when Peter arrives, he begins to share this saving message with Cornelius and the others gathered.

And Peter's message is the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus. You know the message God sent to Israel that peace would come through Jesus Christ. You know how after John the Baptist came, Jesus came anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and doing good and healing. God was with him. Then he was killed by hanging on a cross, but God raised him in three days. He was seen by many. Then he commanded Peter and others to **“preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed judge of the living and the dead.”**

While Peter was still speaking and before he was probably finished, the text says that **“the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.”**

And the Jewish believers were astonished. They could not believe that Gentiles could receive the gift of the Holy Spirit too.

Here is what I find fascinating about this story. Usually when we talk about people coming to Christ, or beginning a relationship with Jesus, we like stories of conversion that are radical transformations. The guy was once a drug dealer and now they are a clean Christian. Or the lady was lying, cheating and stealing, then she found Christ and her life changed. Or a guy was blind, but now he can see. And these stories happen and are amazing demonstrations of the power of the Gospel . . . **but what difference does the Gospel make to the average guy for which life seems to be going fairly well?**

Cornelius is one of those guys. He is not a Christian, or even a Jew. But he does everything that a Jew does. He gives to the needy and prays. He appears to be a really great guy. Cornelius and his family were devout and God-fearing. **But they did not know Jesus.**

There are lots of people like this in our world. There are millions of really good people. Many are just as good as we think we are. They give as much as we do to charity. They even talk to God a lot. They are just as nice as us. They treat everyone with respect.

And then if we add onto those attributes that they have a good job and a great family. And a whole host of other things that look pretty fantastic in their lives . . . **I think we start to ask ourselves, what does Jesus have to offer them.**

What is it that we have in Jesus that they do not have?

For the druggie or the alcoholic or the person with the destroyed life . . . it is easier to see what Jesus has to offer them. I mean, how could their lives be any worse? Jesus offers hope, a future, new life . . . a new chance.

But what about to the person that has it all together. What does Jesus have for them?

In Luke's Gospel, Luke tells the story of a ruler that comes to Jesus. The ruler is a good guy. He has followed all of the 10 commandments since he was a little boy and he wants to know how to live forever. Jesus tells him that he has to go and sell everything, then he will have treasure in heaven.

I don't know about you, but that does not seem like a very effective evangelical strategy for people in our world that are living the good life. I can't imagine that they would understand such a suggestion as Good News. **What does Jesus have for them?**

Our passage this morning appears as the beginning of a dispute that is arising in the early church amongst the first believers in Jesus. Jesus has resurrected and is heaven and Jesus' apostles and the new believers are wrestling with the formation of the first churches. **And the big question that they have before them is who is Jesus for?**

Last week, if you remember, we talked about how when Jesus said that the apostles would get the Holy Spirit, they were more interested at first in political power. **They said, the Holy Spirit is nice and all, but when do we start ruling over everyone?**

Well many of the early Jewish Christians, including Peter, understood the early Christian faith as theirs. They saw it as a continuation of their chosen-ness as Jews in the Old Testament. **They believed that Jesus came for them . . . and them alone.**

They never really thought about the applicability of Christ's message to Gentiles, or basically anyone who was not Jewish. In fact, they presumed that the Gospel did not apply to them and that they should

distance themselves from non-Jews. They believed that contact or exposure with non-Jews made them unclean in the same way that eating certain things did.

The Good News for Good News just for Jews.

And then we get this vision by Peter that causes him to ask, what does Jesus have for the Gentiles? The presumption again had always been “nothing.” But God tells Peter in his dream that this is not the case. God says, **“do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”**

This marks a monumental shift in the movement of the Gospel in the early church and Peter packs up and goes to Cornelius, a non-Jew and enters his house and spends time with him. And if you looked ahead to chapter 11 you see that the other Jewish Christians did not like what Peter had done. In 11:2 it says, **“the circumcised believers (Jewish believers in Jesus) criticized him and said, “you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”**

Let me just say that I am glad that I am glad that we don't refer to each other based upon the condition of private parts anymore . . . but this was simply the identifying mark, the religious act that separated a Jew from a non-Jew, Gentile.

The Jewish Christians were upset with Peter for spending time with a non-Jew. There was indeed some discrimination here, but even more than just not liking non-Jews is the fact that they truly believed that it was immoral to spend time with them.

They kept asking the question, what does Jesus have for them . . . and always presumed nothing.

When Peter entered the home of Cornelius, Peter found a large crowd of people gathering and he pointed out to that crowd of non-Jews in verse 28, **“you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.”**

With that openness to this new audience, Peter then explains what it is that Jesus has for them. He preaches to them.

Nearly each statement that Peter makes begins with “you know.” The implication is that Cornelius and the others gathered knew some things about Jesus. And Peter pieced those things together in a way that connected with them in a new way.

Peter invites Cornelius and his family into a new life story.

It is a story by which they are saved. And I think this is what is powerful about me sitting in some public place and imagining how what I believe applies to all of those people that I watch.

All of our lives are a part of a story. A story that is much much larger than our own. And the difference between those that believe in Jesus and those that do not is that believers recognize the larger story at work and others do not.

The difference is not how good our lives are, or how fancy our houses are, or how smart our kids are, or anything that simple. And the significant difference is not that we talk to God more (the reality is that all people talk to God whether they want to admit it or not), or that we give more to the needy, or are pious . . . **the difference is that we know the story that we are a part of and have a relationship with the author.** That makes all the difference.

As Peter shared the story of God with Cornelius and the others gathered for the first time the story was told to them as if they were included. Peter begins in verse 36, **“you know the message God sent to the people of Israel . . .”** But what becomes different now is that this message is no longer just for the people of Israel, Peter now understands that it is Good News for all.

And as Cornelius and the others hear this story, now with them included in it . . . Peter says, **“everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”** . . . verse 44 says, **“while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.”** Cornelius and the others gathered believed and the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Not only were they included in the story, but they changed their role within it. They moved from nice people doing nice things . . . to people in a saving relationship with the author of history.

This week I watched some of the Prime Minister debates in England and one of the interesting things that commentators picked up on from the debates was how the different candidates referred to values. One of the candidates referred to “my” values, while another referred to “our” values. And it seemed like a harmless thing but as you listened, they felt different. **One excluded the listener, while the other included the listener.**

As we watch people in our world and we wonder what does Jesus have for them . . . my temptation is to take my story, my understanding, my experience and deposit it upon them. I want to tell them “my” story as if it is my possession. And it is no wonder that it seems irrelevant. They are not a part of it.

For Peter, the Gospel was a Jewish story and irrelevant to non-Jews. God helped Peter to see differently, though. **And when Peter explained the story of God to Cornelius and the others in a way that included them . . . they jumped at the opportunity to believe.**

What does Jesus have for people in Tippecanoe County? He invites us to recognize that we are a part of a story. All of us. We have different roles . . . but we are all a part of God’s story. Some of us believe in Jesus and some of us do not, but we are in the same story.

Our task in sharing the good news is to help people see the story that they are already a part of and invite them to change their role in it. To step away from being the star of their own life and into becoming a role player in a greater movement.

The life and ministry of Jesus is not just Good News for us . . . it is Good News for everyone . . . some just need help seeing it.

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