



Daring to Dream Again – Confronting Our Ungodly Prejudices

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Introduction:

We confront our ungodly prejudices by widening our circle of unlikely friends.

Acts 10:1-35

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

About noon the following 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 the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw 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 of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.” Peter went down and said to the men, “I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?”

The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: “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. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

Cornelius answered: “Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

Sometimes our dreams are dwarfed by our own limited perspectives. We may have a dream in our hearts and believe it’s God-given. Later we may discover God’s dream is much larger than the dream we have in mind.

God’s dreams usually go way beyond the capacity of our imagination. God’s dreams are far more creative and far more encompassing than we could ever imagine. The apostle Peter had a dream and later discovered that God’s dream exceeded his own dream. God dreamed of a church where all people would be welcomed. Since the beginning, God’s dream was that all people would worship Him together with joy, regardless of gender, age, race, class, appearance, weight, and all the marks that we use to include and exclude.

God wanted a church, where, in the words of Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” God’s dream for his church is inclusive. God didn’t want there to be racial distinctions, class distinctions, or gender distinctions. God told our spiritual father, Abraham, “All peoples on earth shall be blessed through you!” (Gen. 12:3). God is crazy about you, and about each and every one of us. It doesn’t matter who you are, where you’re from, or what you’ve done.

Belief in Jesus was the common denominator that drew people together when the early church was born at Pentecost. These early believers limited their picture of the church to include only Jews. Yet, God’s dream from the beginning was that from this one group, everyone would be made aware of God’s love. Peter and other church leaders failed to grasp the dream. In an effort to reach only people like themselves, their dream was dwarfed.

We should not be too hard on these narrow-minded church leaders, because each and every one of us here have our own prejudices. Some of us carry racial prejudice. Probably many more carry class prejudice. Some are prejudiced against people who are overweight. I have prejudices I’m not even aware of yet. Prejudices sneak up on us.

Often we think in terms of race, class, gender, culture, ethnicity, patterns of speech, weight, appearance, etc. We tend to include or excluded on the basis of these non-essentials. I don’t mean our backgrounds are unimportant: they matter. But these things don’t determine our worth or our eligibility for God’s kingdom.

Acts 10 is the story of God’s enlarging Peter’s dream and, in turn, enlarging the church’s dream.

I. God's dreams are often limited by our prejudice

It doesn't sound like a big deal for me to say that the first Gentile entered the church in Acts 10, because most of us are Gentiles and we don't rejoice or express regret when a Gentile comes to church. It seems normal. But in the first century this was a big deal!

Unless you are familiar with first-century culture, you wouldn't realize that there was a huge gulf between the Jews and Gentiles. The Jews hated the Gentiles, and the Gentiles returned the favor. Among the Jews there was exclusivism. They identified themselves as "God's chosen people." And as God's chosen people they forgot that their role was to bless all people. Instead of loving others, they hated them. The Jews said that help should not be given to a Gentile woman in labor, because that would only bring one more Gentile into the world. They regarded the Gentiles as sinners and didn't want to be polluted by being in contact with them.

Because they didn't understand God's dream they looked at Gentiles as the "enemy." They wouldn't eat with Gentiles. They wouldn't visit a Gentile home or allow Gentiles into their homes. And again, the Gentiles returned the favor. We're talking about major prejudice. This is like telling a story about a Jew being received among Nazis or Palestinians; a Protestant among Catholics in Northern Ireland; a Muslim to a Bosnian Serb; a Turk among Greeks; an African-American among the KKK.

Often what happens if we don't understand someone or are fearful of someone we distance ourselves from them. Then we see them as the enemy. Then we demonize them. And our distance amplifies the differences.

Look with me at verse 1. Note the setting is Caesarea. The name of that city sounds similar to another word we're probably more familiar with, "Caesar." This was Caesar's city, the headquarters of the Roman occupation of Palestine. Cornelius isn't just a Gentile. Cornelius represents Roman oppression. Cornelius is a Roman Centurion. He is one of the soldiers who was occupying Palestine at the time and is a soldier of high rank. ("Centurion" means ruler of 100. This would be equivalent to a Sergeant-Major or Captain).

Cornelius is also described as "devout and God-fearing." A God-fearer was not a full proselyte into the

Jewish faith but one who believed in monotheism and the high moral standard of the Jews. "He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly." Here you get the idea that God thinks differently about this guy than those in the Church. Cornelius may have been hated among the Jews, but he has regular conversations with God. How can any one of us think another person or group is below us? But we do.

II. God's dreams are larger than our dreams

God gave Cornelius a vision to demonstrate His love; God must now give Peter a vision. It takes a work of God to break down the walls of prejudice. The walls of prejudice are thick.

The next day while Cornelius's emissaries are on their way to see Peter, Peter goes up on his roof to pray. (Roofs were flat, and because the city was crowded, people went up on their roofs to escape the crowds. Peter went there to pray. Maybe some of us could get an idea for our own quiet times with God from Peter.) During this prayer time Peter became hungry, and God used Peter's physical hunger to create a new kind of hunger, the hunger for reconciliation. (Are you hungry for reconciliation? If not, it will take a work of God.) God gave Peter a vision. In this vision, a large sheet came down from heaven.

Peter saw all kinds of animals on this sheet, and God said, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." But Peter says, "I can't eat. I've never eaten anything impure or unclean." Peter knew that according to Leviticus 11 Jews could only eat animals which chewed their cud and had cloven hoofs. And Peter carefully observed the Jewish food laws. God replied, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." It happened three times so that Peter could get the message. And the vision occurred just before Peter's visitors came, so Peter would understand that God loves everyone—not just people like himself.

From childhood Peter had obediently followed Jewish practices and customs. Self-respecting Jews never invited Gentiles into their homes, or visited their homes, and had nothing to do with Roman soldiers. Acts 10 changes the standard; God breaks the taboo, making it lawful to accept Gentiles without making oneself unclean. God wanted Peter to confront his ungodly prejudices by widening his circle of unlikely friends.

In the book of Acts, God made it clear that He wanted His people to reach out into Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and the uttermost parts. But his people stayed in Jerusalem. What happened? Persecution came to the church. Listen to Acts 8:2: “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Where did God want them to go? “Judea and Samaria.” But the church didn’t want to go there. When the persecution came, they had to go there. Yet when they got there, they were reluctant to reach out, and God had to remind them to reach out to those who were different.

III. Action to confront those prejudices

1. *Identify a group of people you have shut out of your life.*

Sometimes we don’t regard ourselves as prejudiced, but prejudice has a way of sneaking up on you. We have to deal with our prejudices. For some, it will be treating people in other faith groups with respect and dignity; or respecting people who are overweight, or the rich or poor.

2. *Examine your reasons (illogical as they may be).*

For some of us, the reason may be that we were taught by our parents to exclude a particular group. For others, it may be that we had a bad experience with people from a different background. Another

Conclusion:

Do you have any labels that need to be torn off? Do you have any barriers that need to be removed and torn down? You see, this event was a watershed moment in the history of the church. We are Gentiles. This is our story! What would have happened to the church if Gentiles were excluded?

We don’t compromise the message to welcome people, but we must send a consistent message of hope to ALL people. It’s a message of love and reconciliation. Do you label people and thus avoid them? Perhaps you need to dream again about the scope of God’s grace. Who does it include? Who do you (unconsciously) exclude? We are called to the same mission that Peter was called to! “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you a fisher of men!”

One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I saw a kid from my class was walking home from school. His name was Kyle. It looked like he was carrying all of his books. I thought to myself, “Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday? He must really be a nerd.”

I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game with my friends tomorrow afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and went on.

reason might be that a particular group behaves in a way that we know is not pleasing to God.

Isn’t it interesting how we have our own ways of calculating and establishing the degrees of sin? Some people may be sleeping around, and we say, “That’s what people do nowadays.” People have affairs and say, “I only slipped once.” We see people neglecting their families and excuse it by saying people are under a great deal of pressure. But what about my greed, my pride, my stubbornness? How can we look at a group and say their sin is the sin God really hates. I have an idea that when God looks down, he sees it all as sin. If we can’t bring our brokenness to the church, where can we bring it?

All people matter to God! We’re in a rescue operation. When rescuer workers went to rescue the nine coal miners trapped in a mine deep in the soil of Pennsylvania over one year ago, the rescuers didn’t select a particular racial profile or personality type. They didn’t ask who was down there. They knew each person mattered! The rescue workers wanted to rescue all nine.

3. *Consider how your behavior needs to change.*

Perhaps you will not tell any more jokes about that group, or perhaps you’ll stand up for them with others who put them down. *Just imagine if everyone in our congregation expanded their circle of unlikely friends.*

As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him. They ran at him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him. He looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes.

My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him and as he crawled around looking for his glasses, and I saw a tear in his eye. As I handed him his glasses, I said, "Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives." He looked at me and said, "Hey, thanks!" There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude. I helped him pick up his books and asked him where he lived.

As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said he had gone to private school before now. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before. We talked all the way home, and I carried some of his books. He turned out to be a pretty cool kid. I asked him if he wanted to play a little football with my friends. He said yes. We hung out all weekend and the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him, and my friends thought the same of him.

Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again. I stopped him and said, "Boy, you are gonna really build some serious muscles with this pile of books every day!" He just laughed and handed me half the books.

Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors, we began to think about college. Kyle decided on Georgetown, and I was going to Duke. I knew that we would always be friends, that the miles would never be a problem. He was going to be a doctor, and I was going for business on a football scholarship. Kyle was valedictorian of our class. I teased him all the time about being a nerd. He had to prepare a speech for graduation. I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak.

Graduation day, I saw Kyle. He looked great. He was one of those guys that really found himself during high school. He filled out and actually looked good in glasses. He had more dates than I had, and all the girls loved him. Boy, sometimes I was jealous. Today was one of those days.

I could see that he was nervous about his speech. So, I smacked him on the back and said, "Hey, big guy, you'll be great!" He looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled. "Thanks," he said. As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began.

"Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach. . . . but mostly your friends. I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story."

I just looked at my friend with disbelief as he told the story of the first day we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend. He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later and was carrying his stuff home. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile.

"Thankfully, I was saved. My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable." I heard the gasp go through the crowd as this handsome, popular boy told us all about his weakest moment. I saw his mom and dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I realize its depth.

Never underestimate the power of your actions. With one small gesture you can change a person's life – for better or for worse. God puts us all in each other's lives to impact one another in some way. Look for God in others.
—Anonymous