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“A UNIVERSAL AND CHRIST-CENTERED FAITH”

Acts 10:1-48

By the sheer length of his narrative involving the Apostle Peter and Cornelius, Luke thinks today’s text is extremely significant! Because of its length I’ll summarize a good deal of our 48 verses and Steve will read one selected portion.

Ours is not simply the story of the conversion of a Gentile centurion named Cornelius and a group of his family and friends to the Christian faith, but in a certain sense is also the account of a kind of conversion for Peter. He realizes that the gospel is universal truth - not only for Jews, but for Gentiles as well.

Who is Cornelius? A Gentile army officer, a centurion or commander of 100 Romans soldiers, a cohort, 10 of which make up a legion. In terms of his beliefs and practices, Cornelius is not a typical pagan soldier! He was an upright person and believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He prayed constantly. He gave generously to the poor. For those reasons the Jewish populace of Caesarea spoke well of Cornelius. He fell into the

category of “God-fearer” a person on the edges of Judaism, who had not formally converted by being circumcised, so he was still technically an outsider.

Scene 1 (v.1-8) tells us that one afternoon at the hour of prayer Cornelius had a vision of an angel. This divine messenger instructed Cornelius’ representatives to take a 30—mile journey south to the city of Joppa (modern day Tel Aviv) to the house of Simon the Tanner and to invite a man named Peter to return with them to Caesarea.

In Scene 2 (v.9-23a), as the three messengers from Cornelius nearly arrive the next day in Joppa, Peter is on the roof of Simon’s home praying. He sees the heavens opened and a large sheet descend, on which are all kinds of four-footed animals and reptiles and birds. From Peter’s reaction, it’s likely all these animals were “unclean” and couldn’t qualify as “kosher meats.” Surprisingly, three times a heavenly voice commanded, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” Being an observant Jew and perhaps viewing this as a test of his faith Peter replied, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything profane or unclean.” Three

times the heavenly voice replied, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

In scene 3 (v.23a-48) when the three messengers from Cornelius arrived in Joppa, Peter and Simon welcomed them, invited them to dinner and to be their overnight house guests. The next day with six of his Jewish Christian friends and the three Gentiles, Peter traveled up to Caesarea.

On their arrival, Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet. Peter instructed him to get up, since as he explained, “I am only human” – not some divine figure! Cornelius had assembled his entire family and a group of friends to hear Peter. When Peter asked Cornelius why he sent for him, Cornelius told about his encounter with the angel. Next comes Peter’s speech.

Steve is now going to read the latter portion of Scene 3 to you, Acts 10:34-48, found on p. 129 NT in pew Bibles. Apparently Peter has been thinking a lot about his vision and the message of the heavenly voice. Peter concluded, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him (has personal faith) and does what is right (seeks to follow

God's will) is acceptable to him." God, the author of justice refuses to show favoritism or judge according to any external criteria. Instead God loves and is fair to all!

After making his pronouncement and in order to clarify what saving faith looks like for Cornelius and the others gathered, Peter immediately launched into a sermon about Jesus. He mentions Jesus' baptism, that Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and went about doing good, that he died on the cross, was raised from death, and appeared to many people, who were chosen to be witnesses of his resurrection. Near the end of his sermon Peter said the Risen Christ has been appointed by God as final judge of humankind and that *through faith in JC* we may receive forgiveness of sin and be reconciled to God.

At the end of Scene 3 while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on those who filled Cornelius' home, allowing them to speak in tongues and praise God. Since this group of Gentiles had apparently received Peter's message about Christ with personal faith, and God showed his acceptance by pouring

out his Spirit upon them, Peter then ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

What truths does this text teach us? The first, involving Peter's breakthrough is that the gospel is intended to be a message for all peoples and nations, universal truth, not just for Jews alone, but for Gentiles (all non-Jews) as well!

First-century Judaism involved a pollution system. The Torah declared certain things and people "unclean." A person could become ethically or ritually unclean by contact with unclean things or people and have to undergo ritual cleansing to re-enter the Jewish community and fully participate again in temple worship. Rabbinical rules collected in the Mishnah declared Gentiles permanently unclean unless they converted to Judaism. This means a Jew could not be a guest in a Gentile home or share a meal with Gentiles without becoming unclean.

Peter was at first confused by the dream and struggled to accept the heavenly message, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." The whole issue begins to ferment in Peter's mind about what and whom is acceptable to God. By the

time he reaches Cornelius' home, he understands that not only does God declare all foods clean, but all people as well! In principle, simply on the basis of racial-ethnic background or national origin, God finds no person on the planet unclean!

By the way the Hebrew Scriptures teach without apology that the Jews were God's "chosen people" with whom God entered into a covenant relationship. However, from the very beginning of that covenant with the Patriarch Abraham, the mission of the Jewish people was to mediate and spread the love and knowledge of God to all humankind, a mission they rarely embraced (see Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:6)!

So a good portion of this text is about a sort of "Gentile Pentecost!" For the very first time a group of Gentiles comes to faith in JC and are baptized with the Holy Spirit, before being baptized with water in the name of Jesus! Now the Gospel has been received in the Acts narrative by groups of both Jews and Gentiles. Our text tells us that the salvation Christ offers is truly universal in scope.

As the title of a book written by a Presbyterian colleague expresses it, the Christian faith is “Limited to Everyone!” Our culture tells us that what is true for you, may not be true for me. While everyone has unique life experiences, according to Scripture, there are universal truths. Among them is the biblical assertion that there is one living and true God who created our world, and sent His unique Son, Jesus Christ to redeem humankind. The only way to be left out, to be excluded, is to refuse the gift of God’s grace in JC!

The challenge for us today is to be open to whomever God brings us – no matter what race or culture or background. Each is to be warmly welcomed as a person for whom Christ died! The Christian faith isn’t intended for an elite few, but for all humankind, as Gentiles are welcomed into the Christian church.

The second truth we get from this text is that our faith must be Christ-centered! Some might stop there and ask, “Wait a minute - wasn’t Cornelius already an upstanding and ethical person, with deep faith in and devotion to the one true God? Wasn’t Cornelius already acceptable to God before he met Peter

and came to faith in Jesus Christ? Perhaps Christ is superfluous?” If that was the case, why did Peter bother to make the journey to Caesarea? Peter knew that something or someone was missing in Cornelius’ faith!! He knew that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes and yearnings, the one to whom the Scriptures pointed, the one who completed Judaism!

Belief in the one true God wasn’t enough. Ethical purity wasn’t enough. Being a person of prayer and being a generous giver weren’t enough. What was missing? The redemption and saving grace of Jesus Christ! Jesus is not superfluous!

So while Cornelius is an admirable person in many respects, he still needs to know about and trust in Jesus Christ as his sin-bearer and leader in life! Earlier Cornelius had faith in God, but now his is a Christ-centered faith and it is on the basis of Christ’s saving work that he approaches God. He hears from Peter about Jesus and forgiveness of sin through Him. He responds with faith in Christ and is baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The Christian faith is all about Jesus!

Friends, is your faith Christocentric, Christ-centered? For you is Jesus Christ the pinnacle of God's self-revelation? Do you trust that through Jesus' sinless life, his vicarious suffering and death, and glorious resurrection, you can have a right relationship with God? That is the discovery Cornelius made, a discovery that's still worth making today!

Let us pray: God of grace and mercy, we thank You that the truth of the gospel is not limited to a small segment of people but is universal truth intended for all humankind, that no one is left out! And we thank You that at the center of our faith is Your gracious and loving outreach to us in the person of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior and Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.