

Sermon Notes for May 5th

Acts 10:1-17; 34-35. “Fearfully Weird”

This is a long text today. We have finished our spotlight on the Gospel of Matthew and now we are going to Acts and then the Epistles. This particular text is sometimes entitled, “Peter’s Vision.” A short background, Peter, near Samaria, has healed a paralyzed man - then on to Joppa, to raise Tabitha from the dead! Peter is now staying with Simon, the Tanner, just outside Joppa:

(Acts 10:1-17 - Voice)

While Peter is in Joppa, another story is developing a day’s journey to the north along the Mediterranean coast.

10 Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and a member of a unit called the Italian Cohort, lived in Caesarea. 2 Cornelius was an outsider, but he was a devout man—a God-fearing fellow with a God-fearing family. He consistently and generously gave to the poor, and he practiced constant prayer to God. 3 About three o’clock one afternoon, he had a vision of a messenger of God.

Messenger of God: Cornelius!

Cornelius (terrified): 4 What is it, sir?

Messenger of God: God has heard your prayers, and He has seen your kindness to the poor. God has taken notice of you. 5-6 Send men south to Joppa, to the house of a tanner named Simon. Ask to speak to a guest of his named Simon, but also called Peter. You’ll find this house near the waterfront.

7 After the messenger departed, Cornelius immediately called two of his slaves and a soldier under his command—an especially devout soldier. 8 He told them the whole story and sent them to Joppa.

9 Just as these men were nearing Joppa about noon the next day, Peter went up on the flat rooftop of Simon the tanner’s house. He planned to pray, 10 but he soon grew hungry. While his lunch was being prepared, Peter had a vision of his own—a vision that linked his present hunger with what was about to happen: 11 A rift

opened in the sky, and a wide container—something like a huge sheet suspended by its four corners—descended through the torn opening toward the ground. 12 This container teemed with four-footed animals, creatures that crawl, and birds—pigs, bats, lizards, snakes, frogs, toads, and vultures.

A Voice: 13 Get up, Peter! Kill! Eat!

Peter: 14 No way, Lord! These animals are forbidden in the dietary laws of the Hebrew Scriptures! I've never eaten nonkosher foods like these before—not once in my life!

A Voice: 15 If God calls something permissible and clean, you must not call it forbidden and dirty!

16 Peter saw this vision three times; but the third time, the container of animals flew up through the rift in the sky, the rift healed, 17 and Peter was confused and unsettled as he tried to make sense of this strange vision.

At that very moment, Peter heard the voices of Cornelius's delegation, who had asked for directions to Simon's house, coming from the front gate.

(Let me try to summarize - a career military officer, part of what would be the equivalent of the SEALs today, is practicing to be Hebrew, with prayers and charity. Cornelius has a fearfully weird vision. It is open-ended and ambiguous. "You send men" is the angelic command. He immediately commissions the necessary forces to fulfill the mission requirements.

Peter, who is experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit, now has a fearfully weird vision. Start eating everything he has been conditioned to detest since birth. Remember when Jesus was around and Peter was rash, Peter would be reprimanded? Now, Peter is rash AGAIN and the angel reprimands. SURPRISE!)

But here is what happens next. The mission team invites the "confused and unsettled" Jew to visit the home of the fearfully weird conquering-Gentile-outsider. Again, an act that Peter would have been conditioned to detest since birth. But they get together and compare notes about angels and mission statements - and then:

(Acts 10:34-35 - Voice)

Peter: 34 It is clear to me now that God plays no favorites, 35 that God accepts every person whatever his or her culture or ethnic background, that God welcomes all who revere Him and do right.

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD!

THANKS BE TO GOD! Amen

God is working both ways to bring two diverse individuals, Peter and Cornelius, together to do something WAY outside their comfort zones. Brené Brown quotes Joseph Campbell: “The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”

Also remember this BIG TIME. Peter and Cornelius are leaders. Brown says, “Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behavior.”

Without turning our whole world over to the touchy-feely, I do want to attend to some fears about radical change by some lessons from two soldiers...

(Brené Brown - Dare to Lead) The Stockdale Paradox was named after Admiral Jim Stockdale, who spent eight years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He was tortured more than twenty times. In addition to fighting to stay alive, he worked every day to help the other prisoners survive the physical and emotional torment.

When asked, “Who didn’t make it out?” Stockdale replied, “Oh, that’s easy. The optimists.” Stockdale explained that the optimists would believe they’d be out by Christmas, and Christmas would come and go. Then they would believe they’d be out by Easter, and that date would come and go. And the years would tick by like that. He explained, “They died of a broken heart.”

Those who died didn’t realistically alter their expectations of their futures.

(Tom Brokaw - Greatest Generation) Mark Hatfield, former Oregon senator, served as commander of one of the landing vessels that took marines ashore during the battles at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Of his feelings about the Japanese, Hatfield said, "You learn to hate with a passion in wartime."

Things changed in September, 1945. In Hatfield's own words, "I was part of a crew of people that went into Hiroshima. This was about a month after the bomb had been dropped." As American ships sailed into the canals, Japanese, young and old alike, stared in silence. "When we landed, the little kids saw we weren't going to kill or shoot them, so they began to gather around. We realized they were very hungry, so we took our lunches and broke them up and gave them to as many kids as we could." Took, broke, gave. Sounds like communion. In that moment, something happened to Hatfield. He said, "...sharing those sandwiches with the people who had been my enemy was sort of a therapy for me." He said he could feel the hate leaving him. It was a spiritual experience.

When things become fearfully weird for us, We have got to love. PERHAPS WITH THE DEGREE TO WHICH THINGS ARE BOTH FEARFUL AND WEIRD, WE HAVE TO Love in new and in better ways.

AND THAT'S THE MESSAGE!