

A Boundary-Breaking God
Acts 10:(1-33), 34-48
Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman
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In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. 2He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. 3One 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." 4He 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. 5Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; 6he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." 7When 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, 8and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

9About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. 17Now 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. 18They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.

19While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. 20Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." 21So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" 22They 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." 23So 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. 24The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. 26But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." 27And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; 28and 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. 29So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" 30Cornelius 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. 31He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33Therefore 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."

34Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

44While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

“What is patriotism but the love of the food you ate as a child?” so asked a 20th-century Chinese philosopher named Lin Yutang. If patriotism is love of the foods I ate as a child, then I’m very patriotic: shoo-fly pie, chocolate shakes, meatloaf, graham cracker pudding, egg and olive salad, chocolate chip cookies, potato or macaroni salad, corn on the cob, corn fritters, my grandmother’s vanilla pie, fried eggplant, etc. There are a lot of sweets in this list, and other unhealthy foods. No wonder I developed cardiac disease before I was 50 years old.

By their foods you shall know them! I had an out-of-town friend ask me where the ethnic restaurants are in Goshen. I named my favorite Mexican restaurant. I suggested the Indian restaurant downtown, the Japanese restaurant across from Everence, the Vietnamese restaurant on College Avenue. I forgot the Chinese restaurant in Linway Plaza. Fifty years ago an ethnic restaurant in the Goshen area would have meant Amish or Mennonite food, which is the same. No longer. That’s progress.

The Jews were known not just by what they ate, but how it was prepared. It had to be kosher. But they were known also for the foods that were forbidden by Jewish law: pork, shell fish, e.g. And this is what Peter was wrestling with in the story which leads up to the text I just read. Simon Peter, while visiting a friend also named Simon, fell into a hunger-induced trance. He must have been very, very hungry! In this trance he saw a sheet come down out of heaven. The sheet contained some critters and creatures, including, apparently, some of the foods Peter was forbidden to eat as a devout Jew. Peter heard a voice say to him: “Get up and kill these creatures, and eat them.” But Peter said in his trance: “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” This happened three times.

Meanwhile, in another town a Gentile man named Cornelius had a vision. Cornelius was a centurion; that is, he was the commander of a regiment of Roman soldiers. But he was also known as a God-fearer: he prayed frequently; and he gave alms to the needy. He may have even

been an uncircumcised Jewish proselyte. God recognized Cornelius's piety and in this vision told him to send some of his people to beckon Peter to come to his house.

A Cliff-Notes version of the rest of this story would go something like this: Cornelius's emissaries beckoned Peter to come to his house. And after a bit of waffling, Peter went to Cornelius's house, told Cornelius's family about Jesus and the gospel of peace. Peter ended up baptizing Cornelius' whole household. This was the beginning of the gospel being shared with Gentiles, the start of the gospel being spread to the uttermost parts of the world.

Now there are a few things I want to call attention to from this story and text:

Hospitality: When Cornelius's emissaries showed up at the door where Peter was staying, they were invited in and they spent the night there. Here were Jews offering hospitality to Gentiles. But then when Peter arrived at Cornelius's house, he was invited to stay there as well. This was a case of a Gentile offering hospitality to a Jew. Peter was a little skittish about it at first. Peter said to Cornelius and kin: **"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."** That vision was getting to Peter. He was having to change his mind about the people with whom he could associate.

A number of years ago I gave a lecture on the theme of hospitality in the Bible. I argued that hospitality was a thread that ran completely through the Bible, Old and New Testaments. While we were at enmity with God, God welcomed us into God's family. We, in turn, are to welcome others, for by so doing we may be entertaining angels unawares. In the grand finale, God comes down and makes abode with us humans.

But since then the thought has occurred to me: what would a biblical lecture look like that didn't focus on *offering* hospitality as a host but instead would be about *graciously accepting* hospitality as a guest?

In 2008 I was on an MCC learning tour to Iran. (Rebecca and Paul Shetler-Fast were on that trip, but then they were just two engaged love birds.) We spent parts of two days in orientation in the K-W area of Ontario beforehand: meeting some Shia Muslims from Iran, learning what to expect, etc. It was a strange culture to us; gender roles were especially tricky. The orientation was really about being good and gracious guests while traveling in Iran.

When we serve as hosts in our houses, we are in charge. Guests must adapt to our ways of doing things, eat our foods. But when we're guests in someone else's house we give up control. Which is the greater challenge: offering hospitality? Or accepting hospitality on someone else's terms? In both cases, we need the grace of receiving the "other."

Status of non-Christians: In Christian circles the question comes up from time to time: but what about those who haven't heard the gospel, or haven't chosen to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior? When that question comes up I sometimes point to this verse in Acts 10: **"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."**

Peter's words here are consistent with another biblical theme: the universality of God's love and grace and the particularity of God's revelation. God loves all peoples and wishes all people to be saved. But God's revelation came through a particular people—the people of Israel—and a particular person—Jesus, God's Son. This is why those who have been given the good news of Jesus' forgiveness and liberation from sin must be a missionary people: sharing that good news in word and deed with others. But we do this respectfully with people who have not heard or accepted this good news.

Back to that tour in Iran: one day a few of us had one of many frequent conversations with some Shia Muslims in the street, in this case several women. One of Muslim women said to us with a great sense of urgency: "I am a Muslim. That's who I am. You don't respect me unless you respect my religion." Touche! Indeed, we owe "respect for anyone who fears God and does what is acceptable to him."

God's impartiality (v. 34) leads God to break down boundaries and cross borders.

Boundaries are tricky things. In some games we talk about the ball or players going out of bounds. Baseball, basketball, football, soccer would all be very different games without boundaries. Boundaries constrain and restrict the players to good effect.

Some boundaries in human relationships are needed. We all know cases where boundaries transgressed led to broken relationships and destroyed communities. This kind of boundary-breaking is often the result of the abuse and misuse of personal power in some way.

But boundaries can also lead to divisiveness, mistrust, hate, war. Just look at the boundaries between different ethnic groups in Yemen. The conflict there is tragic enough, but it has led to a humanitarian crisis and a horrific famine, starvation and death. It is these kinds of human-made boundaries that God wishes to break down. **I once heard a wise leader say that the church is a body without borders.**

Speaking of potential and sometimes real boundaries, I want to read you some surnames and have you ask yourself: which ones of these names are "Mennonite names"? Adcock, Aguirre, Albrecht, Alvarez, Baker, Baker, Barahona, Bauman, Beitler, Bergey, Berry, Birky, Bixler, Bohn, Buckwalter, Buller and Byler. I suspect you've detected what I've done: these are the surnames in the A-B section of the Berkeley Avenue directory. I hope you agree that these are all Mennonite names!

A few years ago I was at a large academic conference in San Diego. Standing in the middle of a boulevard waiting to get across the last lanes of traffic, I heard some young men behind me talking. The one was explaining to the other two what the "Mennonite game" is. So I asked him: "You're a Mennonite?" We introduced ourselves to each other and immediately began making connections with people we knew in common. It's the most natural of human things to do when we meet strangers. You know what his surname is? Johnson. I didn't say to him, "That doesn't sound like a Mennonite name to me!" When he told me the story of how he became a Mennonite, it seemed very much like a Mennonite name to me. Anyway, when we were done

talking, this new acquaintance turned to his friends and said, “See, that’s how the Mennonite game works.”

Something that can make good human connections—like playing the Mennonite game—can also become divisive and exclusive. I have a Mennonite friend who didn’t grow up Mennonite who bristles when people try to make connections with him through his spouse who has a very traditional Mennonite and Amish surname.

I appreciate my Swiss-German heritage; I have at times dabbled in genealogy; and I recognize that in my case it was that very heritage that nurtured me in the Christian faith and impressed upon me the importance of church. So I’m grateful for my heritage, ethnicity and all.

But you might find me bristling too whenever “Mennonite” is defined along traditional, ethnic lines. I’m particularly annoyed when someone is identified as Mennonite who comes from, say, eastern PA, likes shoo-fly pie and enjoys singing four-part acapella music—and yet doesn’t profess any faith or is not a part of a faith community.

“Likeness glues love,” said the English poet, John Donne. But that’s preferential love. Romantic love, love within a family, love within one’s own ethnic group: these are all forms of preferential love. One might even say that loving our own kind is a form of self-love.¹ **God’s love is non-preferential, for God has no favorites. God’s love breaks down barriers that divide human beings.**

Back to Peter in this story about Cornelius, which was Peter’s second conversion. He came to see in a new way the depth and breadth of God’s love and the magnitude of God’s vision for all humanity. After this story Peter had the job of convincing his Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters of the universal dimension of the Christian gospel. **Gentiles are welcome into this Jesus community.** And yet, Peter himself backslid on this very point. At a later time Paul rebuked Peter for hanging out with Jewish-Christians and giving the cold-shoulder to Gentiles.

And isn’t this our story too? Or at least it’s mine. I want to commit myself to a community of faith that includes and embraces people from many ethnicities and different walks of life. But the instinct is still there to fall back into the all-too-human dynamic of hanging out with my own type, the people with whom all the cultural signals are familiar and misunderstanding is less likely to happen in human engagement. It’s the same old, same old: the birds of a feather flock together syndrome.

My friend, the late Alan Kreider, had many great insights, like this one: **“We don’t go to church to change our minds. We go to church to change our reflexes.”** For this reason I don’t want to go to church with people who are all my type. Going to church should be an exercise in breaking the habit of hanging out with my own type. Going to church should help make it natural for me to hang out with people who don’t come from eastern PA, and grew up eating shoo-fly pie and singing 4-part, acapella hymns. For this reason, I want to go to a church that has a mix of people from different backgrounds. In other words, I want to go to a church that looks a little like Berkey Ave.

¹ See Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*.