

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 23, 2023

Acts 10:1-35, 44-48

Before we hear the reading and proclamation of God's word, just a moment of privilege that I actually think will relate to some of the things that we talk about in just a bit. Two things we need to acknowledge this day—Lucy Catherine Strong is a child of Idlewild and was nurtured here in faith and has been a pastor in Atlanta for a number of years now, but just a little bit ago she was installed as a permanent associate pastor at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. So we celebrate with her and with all of her family and loved ones who are with her this morning. Also a note about Patty Snyder. Many of y'all probably remember Patty from her associate pastor role here, basically throughout all the 90s. Patty is retiring from parish ministry this morning as well, so even in this hour her church family at First Presbyterian Church in Baton Rouge is celebrating her. So two important milestones for the Idlewild Community, the extended Idlewild family. We're going to read in just a moment from Acts, chapter 10, as Jeanene shared with our children, and this is a long text y'all. I timed it a couple of times. It takes me at least five minutes and 17 seconds to read the whole story. I actually added to the pericope—that's a fancy word for like the length of the scripture. The Narrative Lectionary cuts out a number of verses that I think for us when we don't read them, they leave the story incomplete. We have the spirit of God working in two different spaces and two different people and then bringing those people together, and so the story is a beautiful one; and we need to read the whole thing, but we need to frame it too. The story you're going to hear is of Cornelius, who is a Gentile, as Jeanene just shared, and Peter or Simon Peter, who is Jewish. It is impossible to overstate how significant the division between Gentiles and Jews was in this time, okay? It's really hard for us to grasp, I would think. This is, if you're an Ole Miss or Mississippi State, this is Ole Miss Mississippi State right, this is Egg Bowl stuff. Okay if you're not a Mississippi football fan, this is, uh let's see, this is Dylan Brooks versus LeBron James, um with hopefully a different result; and this is, um, this is whatever you can imagine as the two most polar opposite groups of people. It doesn't take much imagining, friends. It's these groups that are being represented by Cornelius and by Peter, Simon Peter, this morning, so that's really the story that we are going to read. It's not just two people; it's really two different ways of viewing and moving through the world that seem different. Then the spirit of God falls upon them. Before we read from Acts, chapter 10, let us go to God in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, as you fell upon the early church so many years ago, fall once again upon us. Fall upon us and quiet any voice within us but your own, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning the first verse of the 10th chapter of the book of Acts:

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One 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.' He 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. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When 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, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next 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 it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now 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. They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' They 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.' So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 23, 2023

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.' And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and 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. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius 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. He said, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea." Therefore 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.'

Then Peter began to speak to them: '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.'

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.
I've been hungry before.

I've been "hungry" as my friends have told me. I have never been so hungry that I fell into a trance like Peter does on the roof. Peter goes up in the afternoon to pray about noon the

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 23, 2023

next day, the scripture tells us, and he hears a voice from God after falling into a trance, and this vision falls upon him—a sheet is descending and animals of all kinds are on that sheet.

You just heard the story.

Ruth Anna Hook is someone who knows a whole lot about the New Testament particularly, but particularly about the book of Acts. She says that Peter's vision here, which sets in motion events leading to the inclusion of Gentiles among the followers of Jesus, is the most important turning point in the book of Acts in the story of the early church. Because of these events, she says, those of us, those of us who are Gentiles are welcomed into relationship with the God of Israel. The story that we have just read is a pivotal moment in the early church. Ruth Anna's observation ought not be lost on us because just about eight chapters earlier in the second chapter of Acts, we have read and we will celebrate in about five weeks from now another significant happening in the life of the early church. Does anybody remember what happens in the first few verses of the second chapter of the book of Acts? Pentecost, the birth of the church. We will remember it together. We will ordain and install Elders on that day. We will remember that the spirit of God fell upon the gathering of people, they all started speaking in different languages, ones they didn't know, ones they had never heard, but they could understand each other fully. And if you were to ask many a person what is the most important thing that happens in the book of Acts, I bet you most of them would tell you Pentecost.

This morning we're encouraged to take a different view, to imagine that this story that we have just read, this story that takes place in two different places and then in one, can bind a place, this story becomes the pivot of the life of the early church.

Peter's vision, the sheet with four corners descending upon him, and then the voice from Heaven saying kill and eat, and then Peter, like Peter does saying, "By no means, Lord, I have never eaten anything unclean, anything profane." And then the voice replying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Everything that Peter has been taught, Simon Peter has been taught, to this point in his life has reinforced the idea that there is one particular group who holds, who has a monopoly in fact, on truth, particularly Divine truth, truth about love and grace and hope, truth about care and discipleship. There is a particular way in which one must move through the world in order to be faithful. And then this vision comes, and God unravels all of that in a moment. It is a pivotal moment in the life of the early church.

Yesterday we had about 100 Presbyterian women gather in our Chapel. We worshiped God together and we celebrated the work of Presbyterian women across the Mid-South, but also more generally throughout scripture, the contributions of the faithful women for all time. It made me remember a story about a woman named Janelle Bates. Janelle was the moderator of the Presbyterian Women of North Alabama Presbytery in the 60s. She had grown up in a time when she was taught that scripture was clear, that women ought not be in leadership positions within the Church of Jesus Christ. She wasn't particularly committed to the idea, but it was what she was told to be true. It was what she was told scripture taught, so even as she assumed leadership within the Presbyterian women, she held fast to that belief, that idea.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 23, 2023

Janelle was invited to serve as a representative to the General Assembly of 1969. The General Assembly is the gathering of Presbyterian churches from all across our nation. It's this time in which all Presbyterians come together to do work that needs to be done for the greater Church, to worship God, to be reminded of our connection in all spaces and in all time to each other through Christ. So Janelle goes to the General Assembly. She sits through plenary, which is this very interesting time when everyone is gathered together and you go through kind of motion after motion after motion, and then she goes to these breakout groups. Last breakout group that she goes to— each of these have a different topic, right—the last one that she goes to is a topic about the crisis in the clergy. That's what it's entitled, and the breakout group explains that there is an impending crisis coming for the church. It turns out that seminaries are not producing preachers at the speed and with the pace that they need to, and so in the early 70s it is predicted the Church of Jesus Christ is going to have a shortage of pastors, and churches are going to have to figure out what to do with less and less pastoral leadership.

The session was ended by the leader reading a passage of scripture from the Gospels where Jesus asks a disciple, “Do you love me?” The disciple responds, “You know that I love you,” and Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” Jesus asks the disciple the second time, “Do you love me?” And the disciple responds, “You know that I love you,” and Jesus says, “Tend my Lambs.” Third time Jesus asked the disciple, “Do you love me?” and the third time the disciple says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” and for a final time Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.”

So, Janelle leaves the breakout session and moves back into plenary, and they begin to worship God. And the way she describes it, something like a rush of a violent wind falls upon her and she has this moment of clarity. She'd just heard that there is going to be a shortage of people to proclaim the word of God, and then she's read scripture that talks about if you love the Lord, you are to feed the Lambs; and so if there are people who are hungry for the word of God to be proclaimed to them, she has this rush and this light bulb moment; and she says, “Who am I to say who can and who cannot tend the sheep of God, feed the children who are in need of the nourishment of the word of God?”

It's the first time in her life that she realized that what she had been taught was... was wrong.

That all can be and are actually equipped to teach and proclaim the word of God; that, in fact, what God has named as clean, as good, as beautiful and helpful, let no one claim to be lesser than.

It's this pivotal moment in the life of the early church, but more so than that, it's a pivotal moment here in Acts for Peter. He is having to grasp a new way of viewing the world, one that doesn't allow him to stay in the safety of the people around him in close proximity and the safety of his religious identity. He is being asked to do something else: first to welcome these Gentiles or servants of Cornelius into his home, and then to travel with them, and then to gather in Cornelius's home amongst many who have gathered there, and then to proclaim a word of God to them. And in verse 34 after Peter does that, after Peter proclaims the word of God to them, he begins to speak something else. He says this, “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.” And I like

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 23, 2023

that translation, but it's not actually as accurate as it could be. It would be more authentic to translate “truly understand” to “I am beginning to grasp.” So that the text would then read, “I am beginning to grasp that God shows no partiality. This is brand new to me. I'm not quite sure how I feel about it completely yet, but I was up on the roof and I got really hungry; and then this sheet started descending from heaven, and I don't know what's going on there, and then I looked down and they're these guys who traveled just for me, they say. I don't know why I did it, but I followed them back here because the spirit told me to, and now I'm amongst y'all. I never thought I'd be here. And I'm beginning to grasp the idea, the belief that God isn't actually interested in these groups that we've set up, that my identity is actually less in this particular group that I've identified with for a really long time and more so in a much wider community.”

Here's my thing, Beloved. I don't think God cares how we get there. I don't think God cares if it's a sheet from the sky or a sense of the spirit falling on us like it was for Janelle. I think God cares, though, that we do get there. I think God does care that we begin to see and know and believe that the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not for us to find ourselves in our smaller groups, ones that we tailor and we fashion and we exclude from, but instead the good news of the Gospel is the belief in an ever widening circle of inclusion and God's love.

Richard Rohr says, “The only way I know how to teach anyone to love God and how I myself seek to love God is to love what God loves, which it turns out is everything and everyone. We love in greater and greater circles until we finally do what Jesus did—loving everyone including even our enemies.”

There's something for us today. We're confirming a number of young people who have been on a journey together, a journey of faith, for the last several months; and it's made me ask this week, “What is the church that we are preparing for our young people? Who is included in it and who is excluded? Is the church, as we claim, a place where all are welcome? Is it, as Presbyterians are oft to say, a big tent where diversity is valued, or is it something else? Is it a smaller, more narrow, more factioned group that all agrees with each other, all spends time with each other? It actually doesn't welcome much from the outside.” It seems to me that Bell Hooks's words are words of wisdom for us this morning, Beloved. Community is not formed by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and the cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.

The men that came for Peter from Joppa didn't say he needed to forget who he was, but they did say, “You need to come with us.”

And when Cornelius sent for him, he was certainly aware of his identity and Peter's identity, but he welcomed him anyway.

Do you know who it was that Jesus was asking the questions of in the gospels, the question of “Do you love me?” I said it was the disciple, but he actually had a different name. His name was Simon, but he went by Peter. Three times Jesus asked him this question, and for me it almost seems like he is laying the foundation for what's going to happen here in Acts 10. Many, many years later this new thing that God is doing, preparing Peter but also preparing us to be the church that the world needs; and so I wonder for Idlewild Presbyterian Church what it

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, April 23, 2023

looks like for us to ever widen the circle of those who are included, to not find ourselves in the narrowness of our own exclusion, but to invite more and more people into this conversation and to this worshiping community. If we do that, perhaps we will be nurturing the church that our children, that our young people, that are confirmands actually need—a church that stands over and against the cultures of our world and claims that all belong. May we do that together in response to Cornelius and in response to Peter. May we pray together too. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we don't know when you're going to change our hearts. We don't know, for us, who are the Jews and who are the Gentiles. We don't know who it is that we've decided doesn't belong here, but you do. And so what we pray for, Lord, is that you would let your spirit fall upon us, that you would open us to the possibilities of a community that is an ever widening circle of your love and grace being expanded out to the world. We imagine that's going to make us uncomfortable, as it did Peter, and so what we pray for is that you would help us to begin to grasp what it looks like. We cannot claim true certainty, but we can claim a willing spirit. So make us instruments of your welcome and of your love and of your grace for all your people. For all this we ask in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.