



## **Sermons from St. Marks United Church of Christ New Albany, Indiana**



### **But He's Not One of Us!**

**Text: Acts 10:23-48**

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About 30 years ago a customer service division of General Electric appliances in Long Island, New York had a huge scandal. The manager of that branch was a very by the book kind of person and kept strict tabs on the hours each employee worked, how much gasoline they used in the service vans, all the way down to how many nuts and bolts they had in the supply cabinets in all the shops. They did a weekly inventory to count the parts and the nuts and bolts at the end of each business week and give a written report to the manager. They were great at the details.

The only thing was they missed something. A group of individuals which included a dispatcher, a field supervisor, and several field technicians were pulling a huge scam. When they would arrive at someone's home they would suggest to the customer that if they came back after hours they would fix the appliance for half the price. Any parts were written off as defective or charged to other customers bills who had service contracts and would never notice. This went on for two to three years and that division lost millions of dollars of revenue because of it. The manager was fired. He knew how many nuts and bolts they had but he was so focused on a little thing that he missed a huge thing.

Often the story of Cornelius and the reaction of the people in the early church is a story not unlike that. People are looking at little things and missing something huge that is taking place.

The story begins earlier in chapter 10 when Luke tells us that Cornelius was a Centurion. I have heard many preachers and many Bible study leaders just say this and move on. Cornelius was a Centurion. So?

Cornelius was a Gentile. Jews did not associate with Gentiles.

Cornelius was a Roman. The Romans were the mortal enemy.

Cornelius was in the Roman Army. The Roman Army was the weapon of the enemy.

Cornelius was a Centurion, an officer in the Roman Army who gave orders to his soldiers.

The Romans often used lethal force to maintain order. The orders would come from Cornelius.

The Romans crucified criminals and political opponents. These crucifixions were carried out by the Roman army. The crucifixions in that region would have been ordered by Cornelius. Probably the only person worse than Cornelius would have been Pontius Pilate coming to the Christians. Cornelius was an officer in the army of their mortal enemy.

This is huge. And this story becomes a problem. People are jostling with each other....but he's not one of us! He's the enemy. He's deceiving Peter. We're all dead.

But Cornelius had received a vision from God. Peter had received a vision from God. When Cornelius fell to his knees in front of Peter things began to clear up in people's minds. Peter says:

*"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?"*

Two men are there. Cornelius a Roman Centurion, the epitome of the bad guy; and Peter, leader of the apostles, a humble servant of the Lord.

And Peter welcomes Cornelius and something remarkable takes place. The Holy Spirit, which had previously let loose amongst the Jewish Christians, now is filling the Gentiles and Christianity is changed forever.

There are a couple of things that are very significant in this.

First. If God's mission needs to go forward both Cornelius and Peter need to change. First, Peter on behalf of the Christian Church needs to change.

Lots of times people do not realize that for the sake of the Gospel Christianity often changes.

Worship has changed over the years. In our tradition years ago the Worship Service was right out of the hymnal every week and the hymn numbers were posted up front. The only things that changed from week to week were the Scripture readings and the hymns. The Liturgy was set and consistent.

Russ Mitman, the Conference Minister of the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ has done a lot of scholarly work on Worship and he made the observation that one of the most dramatic pieces of technology which changed Worship was the mimeograph machine. Churches began to produce bulletins and when they began doing this they began change their Worship Services.

Many of the 'old favorite' hymns we sing today were, a century ago, considered to be 'Contemporary music' and not appropriate for Worship. People used to sing them in Sunday School. Things change.

Churches often grapple and change on many other very significant issues.

At one time, if you were divorced, you weren't welcome in church. If you wanted to get remarried in a church, no chance. Now people are not shunned at all in most churches.

In many churches racism was rampant and any preacher who dared raise the issue was in serious trouble in his church. And I use the pronoun 'his' because another change has been that not all that long ago pretty much all the clergy were men whereas now almost half of the clergy are women.

And, back to racism, these days, if someone in most churches was really a racist they'd be too ashamed to tell anyone.

In recent years the issue of sexual orientation has become a bigger and bigger issue and like issues of divorce, race, and the role of women, churches are divided and working their way through their thoughts and feelings. The thing is, people who say that Christianity has never changed are wrong. Christianity changes all the time. Peter and the entire early Christian church had to change dramatically to allow a Roman Centurion like Cornelius in to the Church. And they did.

I keep coming back to Peter's speech in this passage. Peter begins by saying that he now knows that God shows no partiality. For someone of Peter's background, this was a remarkable statement in and of itself. Peter is trying to justify welcoming Cornelius, a Centurion into the Christian Church. There is no precedent to this. This is contrary to the Old Testament and contrary to everything they had believed in **up to now**. Peter is on shaky ground to many, but believes firmly that the Holy Spirit is leading Christianity in a new direction. Christianity changes.

Secondly there is the issue of Cornelius and conversion.

There are numerous accounts of conversion in the Acts of the Apostles. One thing that they all have in common with each other is that they are all different. The conversion of Paul getting knocked off his horse will never be confused with the mutual visions of Cornelius and Peter. We are reminded that conversion, for people, is between them and God and deep individual.

But there is more. Part of people's problem with this story is that upon Cornelius' conversion he was still a Roman Centurion. He was still an officer in the enemy army. He was now a Christian but his life was still his life and the problem people had with him was still very much present.

William Willimon in his commentary on Acts of the Apostles notes that the prominent theologian David Steinmetz found an interesting notion from the early Protestant Reformers and their view of sin.

They believed that sin is so deeply rooted in human thinking and human behavior that only through an entire lifetime of conversion can people change into the new creations that God looks to make. Amazingly two of the mostly unlikely pairs, Protestant Reformers and Roman Catholic monastic traditions begin speaking about conversion as a lifetime experience.

If you go back to the conversion of St. Paul, there are actually three reports of the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. Each time it is recounted it changes a bit; we begin to see the conversion of Paul not as a one moment event, but an event that changes him each day in small ways.

All of this is pretty heady, I know. The problem is, there is no other way to recount this passage in any reasonable fashion. This story of the conversion of Cornelius is such a radical and changing moment in Christian history that there is no simple way to address it.

But there's something more and something profoundly beautiful in this passage. The beauty comes at the end. While everyone is still grappling with changing realities in the life of the church and the conversion of Cornelius God's Holy Spirit falls on the people and they get Baptized. God moved. God ignored the theological controversy of the moment; God ignored the Centurion status of Cornelius. God pretty much ignored every theological and social implication that there was.

St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 that we see dimly now as in a mirror. So much about conversion and so much about who we are as a church and what directions we ought to take are difficult, complicated, and, frankly, exasperating. We are reminded, however, at the end of this story that ultimately this was not about Peter and not about Cornelius, it was about God moving in the church and people not quite getting it.

And that was okay. As long as God was present and moving in their midst, there was nothing else that was important. The same is true for our own day and age. We may not understand everything and we might get completely and utterly frustrated at times, but as long as God is moving in our midst, there is really nothing else of great importance.