

Title: One People Part 1
Text: Acts 10.1-48
Theme: The power of the gospel in the plan of God
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: The conversion of Cornelius turns a gigantic page in the plan of God.

Read Text:

Acts 10 is huge! I mean what happens in this chapter sends shock waves through the world and I desperately want you to see and feel those shock waves. Therefore, this sermon is an introduction sermon. The rest of the sermon comes next week. But since Acts 10 is such a significant event in God's plan, I want to step back and make sure we do not miss what is going on here. At this point in the history of the Christian church (Christianity), the church is made up primarily, though not exclusively of Jews. Samaritans have come to faith in Christ and an Ethiopian has as well (chapter 8). But the Ethiopian kept going back to Ethiopia, so at this point, he really isn't a factor in the day to day realities of early church life. The Samaritans were a new problem. Samaritans were coming to faith in Christ and the Jewish believers were having to figure out what this was going to look like. But, since Saul was spearheading a movement to persecute and imprison all Christians, I think that it is safe to assume that the Jewish believers were trying to figure out how to stay alive more than they were worrying about the Samaritan issue. And yet, the Samaritans were at least partial Jews in terms of race. They were sort of Jews. So, as Johnny preached last week, Peter (9.32) "went here and there among them all (referring to Judea, Galilee and Samaria." Luke tells us about Peter's ministry in Lydda in Joppa not simply because these are cool stories about Aeneas being healed and Tabitha being brought back to life, but these events explain why Peter is in Joppa and what happens to Peter in Joppa becomes very, very important to the shape of life in the church.

Keep in mind that believers spent a lot of time together. They met together not only in public places like the Temple, but they met together in homes. They ate together. Now Jews did not go into the homes of Gentiles, and up until this point, there was no real occasion or need for them to do so. So, Peter is in Joppa and is there for many days staying at the home of Simon, a tanner. Now, as an aside a tanner generally had a decently sized plot of land in order to dry out the hides and skins of animals, so it is possible that the believers in Joppa were meeting in Simon's yard. Meanwhile, up the coast in Caesarea, a Roman Centurion named Cornelius has a vision from God. Cornelius is a moral man, a kind man, a devout man and a God-worshipper. He has a vision in which he is instructed to send for Peter who is in Joppa, who is staying with Simon the tanner whose house is by the sea. (Now we know why Peter is staying there for many days.) Meanwhile, Peter has a vision in which an enormously large sheet from heaven is being let down by its four corners on the earth. In this sheet are all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds. Then Peter hears a voice that instructs him to get up, kill and eat. Even in this trance Peter's instinctive reaction is, "no way." I am a Jew. I don't eat unclean things. The Levitical law prohibits me from eating certain meats and I'm not doing that. But the voice says it again and this time with a warning. "What God has made clean, do not call common." This happens a third time and then it goes back up into heaven.

Peter's head is spinning. He is up on the roof of the house, when at this exact moment the men that Cornelius sent arrive at the gate and inquire if a man named Peter was there. At this point the Spirit spoke to Peter and told him that there were three men who were looking for him and that he was to go with them and do it right away. Peter goes down stairs, meets them and asks them why they were looking for him. They tell Peter the story of Cornelius' vision so, Peter goes with them and heads for Caesarea. Now, Peter is putting the pieces together. He goes into the home of a Gentile. He preaches the gospel. The Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles. Peter and the Jews who went with him were stunned. These Gentiles were speaking in tongues like they had and were extolling God. It was very clear that they were believers. So, Peter instructed them to be baptized and Peter stayed for some days in order to instruct them.

The conversion of Cornelius comes after the conversion of Saul and the Ethiopian eunuch. The gospel is echoing out from Jerusalem and has gone into Judea, Samaria and is now pushing into the fringe of what will be the uttermost parts of the earth. But, we need to see that this is more than the history of how the gospel of Jesus spread to other people and to other regions. It is that. It is not less than that, but there is more for us to see and I do not want you to miss this.

I. What exactly is the problem?

The history of civilization is the history of racial animus, strife and genocide. Whether its tribal warfare in Afghanistan, Hatfield's and McCoy's in KY and W.VA, ethnic cleansing in Serbia, we have always been immersed in suspicions, prejudice and outright evil. Years ago I was at a local gym when one member became angry because another member was taking too long on a treadmill. The angry man, unplugged the treadmill and then told the other guy to go back to the country that he came from. You cannot take those words back and the man on the treadmill will never unhear them. In that moment, that man's anger was like an oil well drill that just hit the mother lode of his heart. The geyser of words revealed the man's true beliefs. "I just don't like those people. Those kind are not my type." What I saw in that moment was this: If that man had a gun and thought he could get away with it, he would have fired it. If he had a bomb and had the authority to drop it, he would have used it. If he had an army and gas chambers he would have unleashed them.

This is not a new problem and while our society has made some progress, it will be a struggle until Jesus returns. And I believe that the book of Acts (and the Bible for that matter) helps us understand why. Just before Christ ascended back into heaven he gave the flash drive to his disciples that had the not so secret mission on it. Here's the mission: Go into all the world and make disciples from every ethnos. While ethnos can be translated as nations, it places the emphasis upon the different types of people, not primarily upon the different places. Christ has ordered us to go and preach the gospel and establish churches for people all over the world because (BECAUSE) his ultimate plan is to gather unto himself, One people from all of the peoples, to be One nation, from all of the nations, to be One, from the many, forever and ever.

That is the message of the Bible. That is how the Bible ends. Gathered around the throne of God are his people from every tribe, language and nation, singing in His language to the Lamb. God is so glorious that he is worth this. The gospel is so powerful that it will accomplish this. But, since this is the ultimate plan of God, we should expect that Satan will do everything he can to

stop it and deface it. Think of it like this: The very heart of sin is rebellion. We don't want God ruling over us (telling us what to do). We don't want God judging us (telling us that we are wrong). We don't want to be accountable to God (holding us responsible for what we do). So, we attempt to make our own rules, determine our own ethics and assume that we can blow off his authority. That, my friend, is rebellion. Rebellion against God is not just personal, it is Satanic. The ultimate rebel is Satan. It started with him. He wants to dethrone God so that he can rule. He wants to thwart the plan of God. What is the ultimate plan of God? It is to have one unified people of God who live with him and enjoy him forever. Therefore, one of the most fundamental expressions of rebellion against God, one of the most Satanic plots ever hatched is racism. And of course, the very heart of racism is the evil sin of pride. The core belief of pride is: "I am fundamentally and intrinsically superior to you."

II. What do we do about it?

A. **Realize that we cannot fix this on our own.**

We cannot get to the heart of this. This is a matter of the condition of the human heart apart from God. Now, we try. And there are some good efforts with trying, but even what we try is fraught with danger. Here is what I mean. When we do not use God's Word to help us understand what the real problem is, we will either misdiagnose the problem or mis-prescribe the remedy. Take for example the issue of racism or what is also called tribalism. "I don't like you, trust you, or think you are worth anything because you are not in my tribe." Many assume that the opposite of that is universalism or globalization. And we are told that if we all focus on our shared humanity, then our differences will all go away. We are all vulnerable. We all get hungry, thirsty, lonely, and needy. We all want to be loved, accepted and belong. And that is true, but that is not all that is true. Just because you and I both get hungry does not mean that I like broccoli.

The solution to racism is not to flatten out all of the races and pretend that we all look the same and are completely the same. God has made the races. The book of Acts is about the gospel going from the Jews to the Gentiles and to the different races of Gentiles. God's Word speaks of racial categories because God created us with these races. How do we embrace and appreciate our God-given races as one people? Understand this: the goal of the gospel is the glory of God reflected by the unification of all of God's people into one people who are happily living under the glorious reign of their eternal King – Jesus. This is a supernatural plan that we cannot cause to happen, but we can and we get to cooperate with what God is doing to bring it about. So, while we realize that we cannot fix the problem, we can...

B. **Realize what has God done.**

God raised up Israel to be a testimony of his glory to the world. They were supposed to show the world what God was like by being holy and happy. Holy people are happy people. But, they ended up as being neither. However, in spite of their failure, God's plan did not fail. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and said that from Israel would come his servant who would be a light to the nations. (Isaiah 42, 49). The OT focuses upon Israel as a land and Jerusalem as a city. The flow of God's people is always toward Jerusalem. If they leave, they long to go back. If you wanted to see God's glory, you went to Jerusalem. But, then something happened that

dramatically and drastically changed that. Jesus changed that! God raised up Jesus and the plan of Jesus was not to have one nation in one spot, but to have one people from all over the world. So, beginning in Acts, the direction changes. Instead of everything flowing to Jerusalem, everything flows out of Jerusalem. For example, from Joshua to Acts Jerusalem is mentioned over 800 times. From Romans to Revelation, Jerusalem is mentioned 14 and most of those are Paul explaining his testimony or talking about the offering he is collecting for the believers suffering in that city. The mission of the church does not focus on Jerusalem but on the world. Realize what God has done. He raised up Israel, to raise up Jesus to raise up the church to reach people from all over the world.

Now, let's stop here for a second. Because this is the very heart of the mission. This is the power source and authority for the mission. Earlier I simply acknowledged that the history of our world is the history of racism, distrust, empires, generational conflict and warfare. Even National Geographic loves to run stories about peace-loving cannibal tribes discovered living deep in the jungle (joke). We do not have a very good history of getting along. World peace is that brief and quiet moment when we all stop to reload our guns. Why don't we get along? Why are we natural born enemies of one another? We are natural born enemies of one another because (and this is hard to hear) we are natural born enemies of God. We are born with the heart of a rebel. We do not want God to tell us what to do. We want to be God. We get that from our sin nature. What happens when you put two kids in the same room with one toy? We distrust one another because we distrust God. We hold grudges against one another because we want to use other's failures as an excuse for our own sin. Case in point. The longest war in the history of our country, is our war in Afghanistan which is now in its 18th year. For hundreds of years, Afghanistan has been marked by tribal conflict. Our army has big guns and big weapons that for the time can force the conflict to go into hiding, but as soon as we leave, the old conflicts will come back. Guns cannot change hearts, only the gospel can. How can you get tribes who have fought against one another for hundreds of years to get along? There is only one hope for that and it is not in the United Nations, it is in a united people who come together at the foot of the cross. Only through Jesus can our sin against God be forgiven. Only through Jesus can we have peace with God. And if you are at peace with God and I am at peace with God, now we can have peace with each other. Realize what God has done. In sending a Messiah to Israel, God sent a Savior for the world.

In the OT, God's people wanted to hunker down in the land and build walls for protection. In the NT, God's people go into all the world. In the OT the focus was on land and Temple. In the NT, the focus is on the world and the church. So, what can we do? Realize and cooperate with what is God doing. Jesus is building his church and is doing it all over the world. The advancement of the gospel into different nations, people groups, societies and cultures is God's mission. Our lives are wasted if we make it our goal to hunker down and hide behind our cultural walls. Worse yet, there is nothing supernatural that is seen if we only associate with people around us, who look just like us. But, we can also realize and anticipate what God will do. The vision of John in Revelation 4 and 5 is our vision. God is drawing to himself one people who are from all of the nations who bring their racial identities with them and come together as the one people of God.

III. How should we understand this event in Acts 10?

God is building his church by reaching and drawing people to himself from every tribe, language and nation. God did this. God made this happen. God gave Cornelius a vision and gave Peter a vision. So, while Jesus commanded the disciples to go on mission to the whole world, God kicked the doors open and made it happen. And he made it happen in a way that the Jewish disciples had not yet conceived. It took them a long time to get their minds around this. The idea of eating with a Gentile, or being in the same family, same church, same fellowship, observing the same Lord's Table was not an image that they had until now. And in a matter of days, Peter is doing something that he would never have dreamed of doing. God took Peter and put him in the home of a Gentile and gave him a seat at the table. Here is the Gentile chair and here is the Jew chair and here is the Jesus table right in the middle. The Gentile is there because of the gospel. The Jew is there because of the gospel. And the gospel blows up self-righteousness and pride. No one is at the table because they deserve to be there. It is all by grace.

I want you to see how big of an event this is. The gift of tongues confirms this. Today, there is all sorts of misunderstanding and abuse of the gift of tongues. This gift from the Spirit makes it clear that this event was from God. The gift of tongues was not only a sign of the Spirit's power but it was a sign that sent a message of unity and understanding. Instead of the languages of the world dividing people as they did because of rebellion at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, the languages gifted by the Spirit were given as a sign of the uniting of one people under Christ.

This really becomes a dominant theme in the rest of the NT. The book of Romans was written to the church at Rome because the Jews and the Gentiles were trying figure out what it meant to live together as the people of God. This issue is all over the book of Galatians and Ephesians. Even in 1 Corinthians Paul is very concerned that he finish collecting the offering from these Gentile churches that he is going to take back with him to Jerusalem because he knows the sense of division that the Jewish believers had in Jerusalem toward the Gentile believers and Paul is desperate to see that gap eliminated.

IV. What can we learn from this account?

Here is a preview of the sermon for next week. Cornelius was a very "good" man, but he was not good enough. He needed the gospel. We should note that if God was able to give Cornelius a vision in which he was instructed to send for Peter, God could have simply skipped the middle man (Peter) and just told him the gospel. Right? Why did God tell Cornelius to send for Peter when God could have told Cornelius himself? Well, obviously, sharing the gospel is what God has told us to do. He doesn't need us, but he has given us this privilege. We get to participate with God and do this and one of the reasons why God had Peter do this is because (like in this case) God was not only concerned with Cornelius coming to faith in Christ, but God is concerned with his people (all his people) living as his people. God is not satisfied with the gospel just reaching different people, he wants different people to be together as one people. This is radical! This is not automatic. While unity, racial harmony, generational unity, socio-economic unity in diversity is not the gospel message, it is a fruit of the gospel. There is nothing all that supernatural about loving someone who is just like me. But loving someone who is different, whom I should be suspicious of? Now that starts to look like Jesus. That is church. What kind of a gospel do you want?