

I don't know if you'll be able to stretch your imagination like this, but I want to take you back to Judaism in the first century of the Common Era. You see, though the land was very diverse- ethnically, religiously, and politically, people of different backgrounds interacted with one another frequently across those lines for commerce, trade and labor, groups could be very insular when it came to family life. To stretch your mind even more- some groups of people had mandates from their cultures that certain types of interactions between people were forbidden. They could make you ritually impure or unclean. Surprised? No? sounds a bit familiar?

In large cities, for example—the temple in Jerusalem had an area outside the holiest sanctuary called the Court of the Gentiles. Here, people who were interested in being spiritually fed and morally informed by the God of the Hebrew people, but who were not ethnically Jewish, those who were not up to date on their ritual purity or had not had the appropriate surgical alteration to become Jewish- these people could still draw near to the temple to pray, to make sacrifices, study the scriptures and participate in most of the life of the Jewish community. As long as they didn't try to sit down to eat or contaminate the mikvehs.

Then this guy came along and ruined all of that. Or so our story goes.

While we read the Gospel and hear about how Jesus went about breaking religious law, we might mistakenly think that he was the first guy to introduce the concept of tolerance. We hear about plucking grain on the sabbath, eating with tax collectors and sinners, healing people without getting the proper authorization, and we get the idea that no one else had ever thought of mixing people up. It's just not true. Actually, throughout history, any time and any place where there have been people crossing paths, there has been diversity. And in the midst of that diversity there has been fear, opportunism, tolerance, power struggle, slavery, war, marriage- the gamut of human reaction.

The difference between much historical tolerance for diversity and Jesus' disregard for societal norms is the difference between seeing an opportunity for profit versus being an advocate for allowing compassion to trump religious self-conceit.

We have the benefit to comb through different accounts of Jesus and the disciples lives, to read and compare several different writers with different perspectives. And in a lot of the circles I run in, we stumble on some nuggets that we agree are pretty foundational to the Jesus Plot. We sometimes condense Jesus' message into the words: Love your neighbor.

So- when we read on into the book of Acts, we may think, what took Simon Peter so long to catch on? Even Paul catches on before Jesus' best friend that God may be doing something with this no-partiality thing. So many dots get connected in the book of acts—maybe instead of the acts of the apostles we could call it the ahas! of the apostles!

The Peter and Cornelius story is fascinating. For a really fun time, read Acts 10 through Acts 11:18 out loud. You will actually find yourself telling the “what happened” at least three times.

There's this back and forth between scenes in Cornelius and Peter- each time them recounting the details of their dreams and visions. Somewhere along the way, Peter associates his vision with the thought that maybe God is not as picky about the believers as the believers believe. But this doesn't sit well with the apostles who get bent out of shape because the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit. But Peter tells them again about the vision and what happened at Cornelius' house. That's when he finally gets to the punchline: So, if God gave the Gentiles the same gift God gave us, who am I to stand in God's way? So, I baptized them. And THEN, the apostles are like, "Oh! Okay. Gentiles are in. Cool."

It makes me wonder what Peter and the apostles thought about all of Jesus' inclusive activity that they experienced for the prior three years or so. Why was this the moment of Great Realization? What about the stuff about inviting poor people and sinners to the banquet? What were they thinking when he meant when he said, "...people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God." What do you suppose they thought, "make disciples of all nations" could have been about, if God wasn't for the other nations. How does that even work? Why this, Peter? Why would a dream about a tablecloth full of lobster be the thing that finally tips you off? Here, in the middle of this story Peter stumbles across this gem of a Bible Quote. Acts 10:34 is one to memorize: "Now, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality.'"

What if we ask ourselves, at what point in history did we make the greatest stride toward truly recognizing all of humanity as equal before God? Throughout history, we have had moments of great clarity that have been borne out of moments of great strife, pain and tragedy. Choose your favorite human-right moment: you can look back 5 years or 500- The last hundred years has seen great leaps forward for the rights of people who have been marginalized and kept out of power just in our own country- think of the strides for women in the workplace, refugees, non-English speakers, black voters, Americans with disabilities, children...

In my life, I look back and see a multitude of moments that have expressed a new layer of understanding human rights and human equity. Here's two interesting things I remember-- I remember people being denied the right to visit spouses in the hospitals, because the state didn't recognize their marriage as legal. The Supreme Court ruled on that, and that has changed- its better now. I remember friends who graduated from *seminary alongside me, and then were denied ordination, because my denomination took a wishy-washy stand on what constituted "sexual morality." And then denominational leaders took a stand, and slowly, that changed. and it's better now. These two changes were, in the grand scheme of history, pretty close together. One happened in 2004, the other over ten years later, in 2015. One of them was the movement of people based upon religious and spiritual beliefs- a conversion of spirit if you will, the other a legal decision based on reason, lobbies, money and political authority and a passion for justice. The part that gives me hope, is that the church one preceded the state one. Sometimes, the way we act within the context of our faith can shape the society we live in. I dare to say, when things are working well, that's what faith can do.

We 100% know we're not there. Things get better. But they just keep seeming to not get all the way there. *Just this week our hearts have been torn by news of the death of Ahmaud Arbery and the racial injustice that is being enacted by the "Justice" system in our state. Every day we are aware of how not-there we are. And now our lives have been further insulated from opportunities to interact with people who are different than ourselves. Our kids aren't interacting with any authority figures other than their parents. Our opportunities to reach out and meet people are extremely limited- even our ability to assemble is DANGEROUS to our health. This is going to be a rough time in human history to move social interaction forward, given that social interaction is forbidden.

There's good news and bad news in realizing that nothing has changed all that much in 2000 years. The good news is, it's human nature to both fear the unknown and unfamiliar, but that our curiosity and moral compasses move us toward understanding and interacting with the "other." The bad news is—there's no end in sight. The good news is, throughout history, we have been constantly reprogramming ourselves to open up to the other. But there's always another layer, a deeper layer that we didn't even know we weren't seeing. So... the good news is that there will always be something for us to work on...?

The really good news is that it starts here. It starts again and again and again. It starts in prayer and in deliberate interaction. It starts now, as we begin to look around our homes and we *miss* one another. We miss seeing people who are different from us. We long for people we haven't even met yet! The current state of life -globally- think about *that- globally-* is a crisis of non-interaction. A crisis of homogeneity. And we're feeling it. And we get to name it and frame it. We get to pick up and run with it.

People of faith have ALWAYS been in the business of understanding differences. At our worst, we look at what makes us different and decide that these differences make us better- that they make us in God's favor. At our worst, we look for ways to make the things that make us the unique children of God that we are- to be a birthright of power and authorization. At our best, though, at our BEST- we realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism. These words of Peter ring across 2000 years- and echo like a singing bowl through the past and into the future, **how true it is that God does not show favoritism**. Where will we take that? How will we let it shape where we go with the great crisis of homogeneity? What will this moment in history look like in how it moved people of faith to respond? How is this our ...A-ha!? In the current isolation, can we name how desperately we need people who are different from us not to have power over- not to comfort our insecurities. How we need others in order to more fully be the people God created us to be? Can we realize how true it is?

Peter and Cornelius

Emily: In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³

Oskar: 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." ⁴

Emily: He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?"

Oskar: He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷

Emily: 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, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

Olivia: About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³

Oskar: Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴

Olivia: But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." ¹⁵

Oskar: The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Olivia: ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.

Oskar: ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them."

Olivia: ²¹ So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" ²² 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.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers²³ from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea.

Emily Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him.

Olivia ²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; ²⁸ 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.

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "Now, I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶ for 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?" ⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.