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Acts 10:1-48
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A Next Step Too Far?

Taking things too far:

- Deconstructed Coffee
- Baby Names – Kylo Ren - 3,269th to 901st most popular boys baby name in one year!

Next Steps in Faith – have there been some next steps in faith that you've been challenged on over this year, as we've thought as a church what our next steps of faith are as a church, or in our individual lives, that you've heard and thought – that isn't for me? As you've spent time in the Bible, as you've heard sermons about your next steps, as you've thought about your next steps in growth groups – and you've decided that some next steps are too far for you right now. The next steps are too serious for you, too big of a change for you, are just a bit uncomfortable right now.

Today as we look at the story of Peter and Cornelius it is my hope that it will be a time for all of us as a church to really examine our hearts, to wisely discern and evaluate where we are at in our journey of faith, and to carefully consider what is stopping us taking that next step that seems too far – and whether God is calling us to overcome our hesitations for the sake of his plans and mission.

Let me pray for us as we begin our time together.

Dear Lord,

Thank you for this time to spend time deep in your Word. I pray as we delve deeper into the story of Peter and Cornelius that you'll be working in our hearts and minds, and with the wisdom and discernment that comes from you, help us to see and to boldly take the next steps that you are calling us to take.

Amen.

Peter's Big Step

Cornelius – The best a Gentile could be

In the beginning of Acts 10 we are introduced to a Gentile man called Cornelius, and it is immediately clear that Cornelius is a great guy. Yes, he's a centurion, a military man, but it is made clear to us, that Cornelius is as best as a gentile could be in the eyes of the Jewish people. He and his family have a devout faith in God. He is generous and charitable, giving to anyone in need. He regularly spends time in prayer to God. Later on in the chapter we see that Cornelius is well respected by all the Jewish people. Cornelius is the peak of what Jews would want to see in a God-fearing Gentile – but, he was still a gentile. And because he was a gentile he would have very limited social contact with Jews. In fact, Jewish custom and law forbade them from visiting or associating with a gentile. The Jews believed that would make them unclean. The Jews believed that visiting or associating with gentiles would damage their very relationship with God.

And so Cornelius, this great guy, this godly generous man, has not heard the gospel. He doesn't have significant relationships with Christians, because they're all Jews. So far the good news of Jesus has gone out in Israel, to the Jews there, and to the Samaritans – who have a Jewish cultural heritage, even if it is quite distant, but still Jewish enough that the Jewish Christians have spread the message to them.

The Church has not taken the next step of taking the gospel to gentiles. But God is going to act and help them take this big step, and Cornelius in verse 3 has a vision and receives a message from God. An angel appears to Cornelius, and tells him:

Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

God is stepping into the situation, and is taking steps to see this gentile man and his family brought into the church, and into a saving faith in Jesus. And so he instructs Cornelius to make contact with the apostle Peter, which he does by sending some of his servants and a soldier to collect him.

Peter's Preparation

We catch up with Peter, and he is spending some time in prayer while he waits for lunch to be made ready. As he prays, he falls into a trance, and he is also presented with a vision, from verse 11:

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds.¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

Peter is presented with a sheet, being lifted down from heaven, with all sorts of animals on it, and is instructed to kill the animals, and eat them. I'm not sure what animals you're picturing at this very strange picnic – I googled this and found lots of different interpretations – ones with elephants, lions, giraffes, even one with a kangaroo on it, which is very interesting. More importantly though – these animals would all be considered unclean to eat by Jewish customs and law - and so they believed by eating them they would damage in some way their relationship with God.

So Peter objects – Surely not Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!

The voice replies "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

And then it repeats.

Sheet with animals comes down.

Get up Peter, Kill and Eat.

Surely not Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!

"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

And it repeats again.

Sheet comes down.

Get up, Peter, Kill and Eat!

Surely not Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!

"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Peter comes out of this trance wondering what this vision could mean, when Cornelius' men arrive, and start calling out for Peter.

Peter's still thinking hard about the vision when in verse 19 we see the Holy Spirit tell Peter

"Simon, three^[a] men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter heads down, following the instructions about the Spirit, but first asks what is going on, why are you here?

They reply in verse 22

We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Peter invites these guests in, and the next day they head off for Cornelius' house in Caesarea.

It's a fairly odd series of events for Peter – but what is clear is that God is working hard in Peter's life to get him ready for taking that big next step of faith of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. God is preparing him – sending him that vision, speaking to him directly by the Spirit and hearing the testimony of an angel visiting a gentile – these are all signs to Peter, to prepare him, to help him get ready for the next big step for himself and the church – sharing the gospel with the gentiles. This is a big moment, and God is preparing Peter so he can take that next step which many may consider is a step too far.

When Peter arrives he himself admits that this is what has happened: In verse 28 Peter says: You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone

impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.

Peter now knows that “uncleanness” is not a barrier for himself in having fellowship with gentiles, God has made it clear to him that he will not in fact damage his relationship with God by associating or visiting a Gentile.

So Peter has arrived. He is in front of Cornelius and his whole household. He has listened to God, and followed the instructions he has been given. He has taken a step that he, and the rest of the Jewish Christians would consider too far. And so rather anti-climactically Peter simply asks – why did you send for me?

Converting Cornelius

Cornelius answers Peter by again retelling in verses 30-32 the story of the angel appearing to him and instructing him to contact Peter, but he understands more of what's going on in verse 33

Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.

Cornelius knows that Peter has an important message from the Lord for him, his family, for his whole household.

And finally, in verse 34, Peter gets it, he has the penny drop moment which changes everything:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

Peter finally understands that the Gentiles can hear, and do need to hear the Gospel, because God accepts everyone who fears him and does what is right, that God accepts everyone who believes in him, and puts their trust in Jesus. And armed with this truth, Peter shares the message entrusted to him, the gospel message of peace through Jesus Christ and forgiveness

of sins for everyone – that is every person, not just Jews – forgiveness of sins for all who believe in him.

And in verse 44, as Peter is speaking these words, the Holy Spirit comes on all heard the message, the gentiles begin speaking in tongues and praising God.

This is the ultimate confirmation from God that yes, he has welcomed the Gentiles into the church, they have been forgiven in Jesus name, as they too have received the promised Holy Spirit – accompanied with the same signs as when the first followers of Jesus received it in Acts 2. Peter can't stop himself from ordering the baptism of these new believers into the Church in Jesus' name, because he has a clear sign from God that these new believers are completely, and totally a part of God's plan for the church, and God's mission is in fact to reach everyone with the gospel, not just the Jews. Peter has taken this big next step for the church, and from this big moment, everything changes in Acts. God's Church is now energised and prepared for Mission to the whole world.

And this big moment, this defining confirmation of God's mission to see all people won for Christ and transformed to be witnesses of Jesus in all they say and do, still has big implications for us as well.

This is a reminder for us today that God's Mission is for all. In God's eyes there are no limits, no barriers, no exclusion points as far as he is concerned as to who can have a saving faith in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is for all – whether they are people who are more like Saul from last week – the hostile antagonist to the faith, the person who hates Jesus, who hates Christians, or whether they are more like Cornelius – a good spiritual person who seems open to the idea of God, but are in the wrong culture so we count them out from hearing the gospel. There is no one that is a step too far for them to be reached for

the gospel. Athiest, Buddhist, Gay, Muslim, Transgender, Chinese, Aussie, Student, Worker, Parent, Retiree, Child, Teenager, whatever you think of as a 'good person' and whatever you think of as a 'bad person' all can be reached by God with the gospel, because he isn't interested in favouritism. God is interested in people fearing him and doing what is right, believing in him and putting their trust in Jesus.

So, I'd like you to just take a moment and think – who would you be surprised to see become a Christian? Because that's what happened for the Jewish Christians who were there with Peter – verse 45 tells us that they were **astonished** that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles....

So...Who would you be surprised to see become a Christian? Pray for that person. And be encouraged to know that even that person is not beyond God's reach.

Maybe it's a person who you know has a hard heart to the gospel – on the spectrum of Saul and Cornelius they're much more of a Saul – maybe your next step for them is to keep on praying for them, pray for opportunities, pray for God to work in their heart and mind – and be encouraged with the knowledge that the gospel is for them, and you don't know how God will work in their lives.

Maybe you're struggling to think of someone – in which case your next step could be to be praying that your eyes would be open to see those who you wouldn't think are searching and desiring God, but are people who like Cornelius, are just waiting for someone to share the gospel with them. There are people out there who have a deep desire to be in relationship with God, but they need someone to share him with them. Maybe you could be that person?

Our God is a God who works powerfully in people's lives to see salvation come to them. We saw that last week with Saul. We saw it today with Cornelius. Our God's mission is to everyone, and so lets pray boldly that he would intervene in people's lives to see them won for Christ.

God's Mission is Greater than Human Tradition

But why did God need to intervene in such a big way? Why wasn't Peter and the Church already bringing the gospel to the gentiles? As I've been reading and thinking about this passage this thought has come up again and again. Because here's the thing – shouldn't they already have been doing it? Jesus told them they would be witnesses in his name, in Israel, Samaria and to the ends of the Earth. This is the ends of the earth part – the gentiles – so why weren't they bringing the gospel to the gentiles? Peter and the apostles had been with Jesus for 3 years prior to his death – and they saw him to do some miracles and teaching among the gentiles – not nearly as much as the Jews, but still, he did do it – so why wasn't the church bringing the gospel to the gentiles? When we finished our time in Genesis we saw this big moment where God promised to Abraham that through him and his family he would bless the whole world – that's the gentiles – so why aren't the church on top of this already? I think mission to the gentiles was just a next step too far for them, because they were letting their human traditions get in the way of the mission that needed to be done. Peter's Jewish barriers to the gentiles needed to get broken down by God working and preparing him for this big moment – because God's mission is greater than human tradition.

And I think just like Peter's Jewish traditions were a barrier to the gentiles hearing the gospel that needed to be broken down, were a barrier to him taking that big next step. I think we often have very human things that get in the way of taking the next step. Very human, worldly Things that are barriers that gets in the way of us taking that next step of faith.

What is God putting on your sheet that you keep putting off?

So I'd like you to imagine for a moment, that you, like Peter are presented with a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven – and on it are the next steps in faith that you know you need to take, but are the next steps too far for you. What are the next steps of faith that are on that sheet for you? The steps that God is saying "Take this Step, to be a better witness for Jesus, to be transformed by the gospel for me". I know for me God's been putting on my heart again and again over months and months – Jason – You need to find a space outside of your 'ministries' to be a witness and blessing to Non-Christians – and I haven't taken that next step! What has been the next step that you haven't taken that is on your sheet?

Instead, like Peter we cry out: Surely not Lord! Its not what we do!

Surely not Lord! It makes me feel awkward!

Surely not Lord! It makes me feel uncomfortable!

I think a real danger for us today, is that instead of letting God and his word transform and shape our lives, we let our own worldly standards and values set limits for how far we will go with his words, we set limits to those next steps we can take – we look at God’s word, and his desires for our life, and say – this far, is as far as God wants me to take this command, because that is all I am comfortable with. Any further than that is a step too far for me. We let our identity, our culture, our way of life dictate God’s Word, rather than letting God’s Word speak into our own lives.

For example – from this passage we learn that God shows no favouritism, and so everyone is welcome in the church – and so we should be prepared to love, support, encourage and welcome everyone.

But...our human traditions gets in the way and says – Yes we should take the next step welcome everyone in the church....but I’m only prepared to take the next step in welcoming and having relationships with those people who are the same as me – I’m only comfortable with that.

We so easily set limits and standards on how far we are prepared to go with God’s word – rather than letting it show us and lead us on that next step of faith we need to take in furthering God’s mission in the world.

And we do this again and again with God’s word – it presents us with a next step to take, and we turn it down, because we impose our own human limits on its directions to living a Christian life.

Paul says in Ephesians 4 verse 29 - Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. – but surely a little bit of sarcasm is fine. A little bit of playful putting down.

In Acts 4 verse 12 tells us that Salvation is found in no one but Jesus, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” But as we live in an age of tolerance

and post truth we feel more and more uncomfortable standing up for that truth with our friends and family who believe differently to us.

I honestly believe one of the big challenges for us in our faith – and even more so for the children and youth in our church community – will be making sure we let the Word of God speak into our culture – rather than letting culture and subjective truth, human tradition, and stuff we do just because we do it dictate the meaning of God’s Word to us today. We need to keep letting God direct us in the next steps of faith to take, and to be mindful of when the world and our worldly ways of thinking are putting up barriers and obstacles to his plans and intentions for us.

And this is something we need to keep being mindful of, and keep being wary of – because even as we take next steps of faith, and overcome our worldly ways of thinking, it has a way of just creeping back in.

Even Peter who had this watershed moment when he preached the gospel to gentiles, saw them believe, defended that decision to the council in Jerusalem in Acts 11, defended the right of Gentiles to believe without following all the Jewish customs in Acts 15...in Galatians we hear how Paul chewed him out for refusing fellowship with Gentiles to save face with some Jewish believers. He walked back his next step of faith – for the sake of human tradition – for the sake of feeling comfortable, for being accepted. Maybe you’ve been like Peter and taken a big step of faith – but you’ve walked it back as well – for the sake of comfort, for the sake of ease. What is the next step of faith you need to take again?

God’s Mission is to see people everywhere, from every culture, from every way of life, transformed by the gospel to be witnesses of Jesus in everything they say and do. What is the next step of faith you need to take, that step that you’ve felt is too far – but need to take, because your identity in Christ is greater than your worldly identity now. What step do you need to take – that God’s been putting on your heart again and again – and now is the time to step up, and listen to him, rather than the world?

Let me pray to finish.