

Two Visions, One Gospel (1/2)

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Scripture: Acts 10: 1-17; 23b-24; 34-36; 44-48

These are some selected verses from the tenth chapter of the book of Acts, usually called the “conversion of Cornelius.” It is the story of two visions and an encounter: the vision of Cornelius at Caesarea, the vision of Peter at Joppa and the resulting meeting between Peter and Cornelius.

Let us begin by comparing the two visions.

First of all, the vision of Cornelius at Caesarea. Cornelius is not a Jew. He is one step and Gentiles whom the Jews call “God-fearers,” who hovered around Judaism, accepting many of its teachings, and although sympathetic to the faith of Israel, did not have the commitment to take the final step, and join the people of God. Apparently, most God-fearers were attracted by Jewish monotheism and by its moral teachings, but repelled by Jewish ceremonial practices, and particularly by circumcision.

This particular God-fearer, Cornelius, is a Roman citizen, for only men holding such citizenship could attain the rank of centurion, even in the auxiliary troops composed of non-citizens.

In contrast, the other vision comes to Peter, one of the twelve, a faithful Jew who has followed Jesus for years. In his Gospel, Luke repeatedly portrays him as the spokesperson for the entire group of disciples. He is the one who first declares that Jesus is God's Anointed. He is one of three privileged disciples who witness the transfiguration on the mountaintop.

Likewise, also in the book of Acts Luke singles him out as the principal spokesperson for the 1 followers of Jesus at Pentecost, and even before that, in the election of Matthias. In chapters 3 to 5 we have also been told that, together with John, he defied the Council that ordered them to be silent, and for that reason he had been persecuted and punished. If anyone was an insider in the new community of faith, that was Peter.

The story tells us that each of these two had a vision. In the matter of such visions, we would expect Peter to take the lead. After all, he had taken the lead in confessing Jesus as the Christ; he had taken the lead at Pentecost; he had taken the lead in healing the lame man at the gate of the Temple; he had taken the lead in speaking before the Council, and he had taken the lead in spreading the word of Jesus throughout Judea.

But that is not what happens. Actually, the vision comes to Cornelius almost twenty-four hours before it comes to Peter. And before Peter even has his vision, the messengers whom Cornelius has sent are already well on their way to the house where Peter is staying.

Furthermore, the text says quite explicitly that Cornelius's vision was clear: "he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in." And the angel told him exactly what he was to do, including the precise address where Peter could be found: "send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." (Just about the only thing lacking was the zip code!)

In contrast, Peter's vision occurs when he is hungry and falls into a trance. And the vision is not altogether clear. We are told that he saw "something descending like a great sheet." And there is a dialogue in which Peter resists the voice that comes to him:

–Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

–No, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

–What God has cleansed, you must not call common.

According to the text, this happened three times, and still Peter would not budge. When "the thing" (that is what the text calls it) is finally taken up to heaven, we are told that "Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen."

Why is it that the vision of Cornelius is so much clearer than the vision of Peter? Perhaps we have a clue in the city where the vision of Peter takes place. That city is Joppa, well known in Biblical literature for the acts of another messenger sent by God to a foreign people. It was in Joppa that Jonah of old took a ship for Tarshish, in order to avoid the call of God to go to Nineveh. In that ancient story, we are told that the reason why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh

was that he knew that Yahweh is a God of mercy, who would forgive Nineveh; and Jonah would have no part of it.

And now, again in Joppa, this other messenger, whose real name is Simon, son of Jonah, receives a similar call. God does not intend for him to go too far away from Nineveh. But Caesarea is far enough for any self-respecting, religious Jew.

Caesarea was not highly regarded by the more traditional Jews, for it was built by Herod the Great following the Roman pattern and named in honor of Augustus Caesar. In it, as in any Hellenistic city, some of the main buildings were temples to the gods. Although there were Jews in Caesarea, other Jews often considered them inferior in their religious commitment, for they lived in a city where pagan practices were common, and where they could not avoid becoming ritually impure.

Caesarea is the symbol of Roman power and pagan uncleanness. We can only conjecture what Peter would have said if God had told him to go to Caesarea and baptize a group of heathen Romans. But, by the manner he reacted to the voice that said, “kill and eat,” it seems safe to surmise that he would not have been altogether pleased at the prospect. So rather than a distinct command to go to Caesarea and bring Cornelius into the community of faith, Peter receives a vision whose meaning is not clear.

That meaning does not become clear at once. Rather, it is elucidated progressively, as Peter takes first one step and then another in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit. At first, the Spirit seems to call him away from his meditation on the meaning of the vision, simply telling him that some people are looking for him, and that he should go with them. Then he hears the messengers tell of Cornelius' vision. Still there is no word to him on the connection between the two visions; but, because the Spirit has told him to do so, Peter receives the messengers, and the next day he and a number of believers leave for Caesarea with the messengers.

Peter's first encounter with Cornelius and his friends is not felicitous by most modern missiological standards. First, when Cornelius falls at his feet and worships him, a common enough greeting for a Roman receiving an honored guest, Peter rejects that gesture rather rudely: "Stand up: I too am a man." And then, when he finally enters the house where Cornelius has gathered his friends and kin, Peter's speech is not calculated to win friends and influence people: "You yourselves know how 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." In other words, if it were up to me, I would not associate with the likes of you. But God has told me that I must not call you unclean, even though that is precisely what I really would like to call you.

There is progress here. At least, Peter has begun to see the connection between his perplexing vision at Joppa and the call from Cornelius. But he still is not convinced. According to v. 22, Cornelius' messengers have already told him why he was sent for. But, despite that, Peter asks

again, “I ask then why you sent for me.”

Despite Peter's rudeness and limited vision, Cornelius insists and tells him once again of the vision which Peter has already heard from the messengers sent to him. Eventually, Peter seems to get it, and says “now I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Now he is intellectually ready to share his message with these latter-day Ninevites, on whom God has decided to show mercy. So, he starts preaching a sermon, only to be surprised once again by the outpouring of the Spirit on his audience, to the point that finally he brings his newfound intellectual conviction into action, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

This entire story is usually called the conversion of Cornelius. But when one reads it carefully, it is the conversion of Peter just as much as of Cornelius. Cornelius is converted from a God-fearer to a follower of the Way. Peter is converted from a follower of a narrow Way, limited to those of his own heritage and traditions, to a proclaimer of a Way which is open to all persons, including the unclean Romans. In the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, it is not only Cornelius, but also Peter, who hear the Gospel anew and are called to new obedience.

It has been so throughout the history of the Christian church. Unfortunately, too often we speak of the history of the expansion of Christianity, without realizing that it is also the history of the

conversion of Christianity. Indeed, again and again the church has discovered its full being, its true nature, not so much at the centers as at the edges, where its own vision, often obscured by traditionalism or by institutionalism, is renewed and clarified by the vision of others. Look at chapter 11 in Acts, the continuation of this story, and you will see that the church in Jerusalem learns from the church in Caesarea. The believers in Jerusalem had a very narrow understanding of the scope and reach of the Gospel, and they demand explanations from Peter. But when he tells them what has happened in Caesarea, the entire church is converted, saying: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Look at your New Testament. How much of it was written in Jerusalem, and how much of it was forged on the anvil of the encounter with the Gentile world?

Had I lived in the first century, I, too, like Peter would have been surprised at having my dim and confused vision clarified by a vision coming to a Gentile in Caesarea. Had I lived in the sixteenth century, I would have expected the most significant word on the meaning of the Gospel to come from Paris, or Rome; but certainly not from marginal Wittenberg. Had I lived in the eighteenth century, and had my name been John Wesley, I, too, would have expected to work in nice, beautiful churches, and would never have thought to discover a new dimension of the Gospel in the faces of illiterate miners in Bristol.

And now, living in the twenty-first century, I must constantly be reminded that some of the most significant insights into the meaning of the Gospel are coming from Soweto in South Africa and

from Santa Ana in El Salvador.

This may be surprising, and even upsetting, as it was for Peter. But it is no more than what Jesus told his disciples in the Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” We have usually read this passage in the sense that the nations need our message. And that certainly is true. But what we have often missed is that, if it is true that all authority has been given to Jesus in heaven and on earth, we can only know what the lordship of Jesus really means as we go to the nations, there to see that authority that has already been given to Jesus. “All authority has been given to me” means “I have been given authority over Cornelius and his kin, and as you go to them and share their vision, you will learn something of my authority and my lordship.”

Today, we United Methodist are living in times of perplexity, similar to Peter's situation after he had his vision. We have a vision that we know comes from God; and yet, we are perplexed. We have a vision of the time when “they shall beat their swords into plowshares”; and yet we see war all around us, and we know not what to do. We have a vision of a heavenly feast when all shall be fed; and yet we know not what to do about world hunger. We have a vision that “they shall sit, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree”; and yet we know not how to deal with economic injustice. We have a vision of alabaster cities gleaming; and yet we know not how to cleanse our inner cities of violence and corruption. We have a vision that our young people will see visions; and yet we know not what to do about the distorted visions of

drugs and alcoholism. We have a vision of the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord; and yet we see our own membership dwindling, and we know not how to give effective witness.

Like Peter, we too have a vision. We know that it comes from God. But, also like Peter, our vision leaves us perplexed.

Could it be that, like Peter, we too must find clarity for our vision by responding to the vision of others whom we may have considered marginal? Could it be that we must discover what evangelism means from the church in Namibia or in Brazil? Could it be that we must learn some things about how to deal with world hunger from the people of New Guinea? Could it be that we must learn new dimensions of the Gospel message from the church in El Salvador? Could it be that the poor have something to teach us about the proper use of wealth? That the elderly have something to teach us about how to use the strength of youth? That the people imprisoned in our slums know something we must learn about the nature of city life? That only those who have known hopelessness can tell us how to deal with drugs and addiction? That Jerusalem will hear the Gospel from Caesarea?

Acts 10 ends with a baptism: The baptism of Cornelius and his household by Peter and his companions. Just a few days ago, if we celebrated the traditional Easter eve service, we and the whole church reaffirmed the vows made at our baptism. Today, and every day, we seek to

discover what those vows may mean for our present and daily lives. But I submit to you that there is not better way to discover the meaning of our baptism than by baptizing; that there is no better way to discover the meaning of salvation than by going to the lost; that there is no better way to discover the wideness of God's mercy than by going to those for whom there seems to be no mercy in this world. Then will our vision be made clear, just as Peter's vision was made clear. Then will our church discover the far-reaching power of the Gospel, just as the church in Jerusalem did when Peter reported to it. Then we shall once again rejoice in the mighty things that God is doing in our midst. So be it. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the God in whom we are baptized. Amen.

