

SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | PARTICIPATION | POWER | PACE-SETTING | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

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# Purposeful Narrative

#5 How do the stories of new backgrounds become incorporated into our overarching history? How do all of these streams flow together into one story moving forward?

## Acts 10, NIV

### CORNELIUS CALLS FOR PETER

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

### PETER'S VISION

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something

to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "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." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

### PETER AT CORNELIUS'S HOUSE

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a



large gathering of people. He said to them: “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. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them

speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Hello. Bonjour. Jambo. Tansi. My name is Stacia, and I co-pastor here in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Prince Albert is on Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the Métis and Dakota nations. My husband and I are American imports to Canada with fully Canadian kids. I wanted to give you a little bit of context about where I live and greet you in some of the languages that shaped my community and my congregation. Canada is, of course, famously bilingual—both English (hello) and French (bonjour). (That’s about the extent of my French.) Jambo is Swahili; a number of newcomers to Canada have made this city and our congregation their home. And tansi is Plains Cree, the language of the First Peoples who dwelt here, the first carers and inhabitants of this land. They called it Kistahpinkanik—the great meeting place. Tansi means more than just “hello.” It’s more than a greeting; it’s a question, and it’s an invitation to further conversation and relationship. Literally translated, it means “How?” Or colloquially, “How are you?” I called my friend Donna to help me with my Cree pronunciation, so thank you, Donna. We would ask, “Tansi?”

And respond, “Namoya nantow. Egwah kiyah?” (“I’m fine, and you?”)

“Peyagwan.” (“The same.”)

The particularities of where I’m located and where my congregation is situated matter. The particular details of the history of Kistahpinkanik, of this land we now call Prince Albert, matter. The particular people who have lived here, have met here, and have made this their gathering place—those stories must be told. Recently, our city completed a lovely bike and walking path around the city. And they’ve now added the Indigenous Peoples of Prince Albert Interpretive Walk with six interpretive signs posted along this trail near our beautiful riverbank. The six signs include information about each of the six First Nations and Métis Indigenous groups: the Woodland Cree, Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, Dakota, Dene, and Métis—all these were the First Peoples in Prince Albert who



settled at this area on the riverbank, Kistahpinkanik.

The particular cultures and the gathering place at which they met matter. The particularities of your community and your cultures matter. What are the particularities of your setting? Those details matter to the mission, and they matter to God. The particularity of these people and this place is a part of the beautiful diversity that God has created, called, and empowered to be the body of Christ on earth. And we would be remiss if we did not do our part to honor the particular gift to our fellowship that these stories bring.

Acts 10 tells us another story of particularity. The story of Cornelius and Peter's encounters with the Holy Spirit makes clear to us that great cosmic change is driven by God's impartial particularity. God has called, created, and empowered, not a bland, generic people devoid of cultural and ethnic particularity, but a community teeming with life and difference and diversity held together in the body of Jesus. As we dive into the story of Acts 10, we will start as Luke, the author of this story, does by noting the particular setting of the story.

At Caesarea, we are told, is where the first action in our little drama will take place. Caesarea is a key port in a key zone. It was built by Herod the Great to force all ships through so he could collect a hefty tax. It's an important military town, and it's where the Roman governor of the province would normally reside because the mild sea climate was much to be preferred over mountainous and chillier Jerusalem.

In this strategically key military port, we are introduced to the first of our main characters: Cornelius. Cornelius is a Roman, a soldier, and a centurion in the Italian regiment. If this were a movie script, the notes might include something about vaguely ominous music underscoring Cornelius's first appearance on the screen. The introduction of a centurion (a leader of 100 soldiers) in this key military post might indeed lead us to think that we have a villain entering the scene. But then, a twist. Luke says—this Cornelius, this soldier, the centurion—he and all his family were devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. Being a God-fearer but still a soldier meant that Cornelius was not a convert to Judaism. (One could not convert and continue to serve in the Roman military in homage to Caesar.) But he demonstrates some pretty faithful Jewish practice in praying regularly and giving

generously.

The next character in our drama is Peter, who (if we have read chronologically throughout Luke's story) we know well. We've seen Peter called to Jesus's service. We've seen Peter misunderstand, screw up, deny Jesus, be restored, and now lead the church. Peter has been an impulsive, hotheaded, driven, dramatic, and outspoken character. In this story, though, we're seeing a different Peter who seems tempered by some risk averse, change resistant, almost protective behaviors. It's a Peter who resists, who's a little unsure, but who ultimately obeys.

And, of course, the central character in our drama, the One who drives every last moment and detail of the action—from sending angelic messengers to giving Peter a vision, to speaking clearly that Peter should trust the strangers that show up at his door—is God.

So now that we have our set (Caesarea) and our cast (Cornelius, Peter, and God by the power of the Spirit) clear, let's review the action in our drama.

Cornelius, the God-fearing Roman centurion, has a vision at about three in the afternoon. Luke, our narrator, tells us that he distinctly saw an angel of God, who then called out to him by name. Cornelius, the leader of 100 Roman soldiers, stares back in fear. I'm guessing this man has seen some military campaigns, yet he stares back in fear at the angelic messenger before him. "What is it, Lord?" he asks. Don't miss the weight of that title, "Lord," coming from the mouth of one who serves Emperor Caesar.

The angel tells Cornelius that his particular actions have been noticed by God. God knows him by name, knows who he is, and how he lives—he matters to God. And then the angel gives him some instructions to send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter, who is staying with Simon the tanner whose house is by the sea. There's a lot of specificity and meticulous arrangement in the details of this encounter—naming people and places and even approaching what in ancient times was likely as good as an address: the house by the sea. And so Cornelius complies with his Lord's instructions, sending two of his servants and one devout soldier armed with the details of everything that had happened to him on their way to Joppa.

The following day, God continues to drive the action of this story forward in Peter. Peter is up on the roof—probably from midday prayers—and he's hungry;



he wants something to eat. And while he's waiting for his meal to be prepared, he has a vision. Hunger, Willie James Jennings says, drives our prayers. "God comes to Peter inside the creature's deepest truth—in the moment of his hunger," according to Jennings. It's a place of creaturely vulnerability: to be hungry. Jennings reminds us that, too often, we have turned our prayers against vulnerability, against hunger, imagining prayer as the antidote to hunger. He says that hunger needs prayer, but prayer also needs hunger. Hunger sets the stage; it opens the vulnerable spaces. It's a vital part of the setting of this story. Because that setting, that vulnerable space, is where God brushes up against us and can change us. Because the story is about Cornelius, but it's just as much about Peter in need of change.

It's in this space that Peter enters into a kind of a trance and sees heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained, the text tells us, all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds. I can't hear a reference to four corners without it sparking in my mind the powerful and truthful teachings of the First Nations people on the Medicine Wheel—the four directions: North, South, East and West; the four seasons; the four dimensions of who we are as human beings: spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical; and the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of it all reflected in the circle. These animals are not just food in Peter's dream, they are God's good creation. God created it and said it was good. But Peter can't quite see that and can't quite hear it when a voice tells him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." Instead, what Peter sees are glaring designations: clean, unclean, impure.

And here we get our first glimpse of the resistant Peter, the one who says, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean, and I am not about to start now." Have you ever tried that one with God? You get a fairly clear direction from God and then you're like, "Whoa, are you sure? No way, God; you cannot possibly mean that. I must be confused. Maybe you're the one who's confused. You're kidding me, right, Jesus? You aren't actually asking me to do that." Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. God is so generous and so patient with his beloved Peter and with you and me when we try this sort of resistance. Telling him, not once, not twice, but three times: "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.

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

Of course, Peter doesn't get it. But God has orchestrated all the details so that even while he's still continuing to contemplate what on earth this could all mean, the men sent by Cornelius knock on Simon the tanner's door. And the Spirit, in God's infinite generosity, doesn't just prompt Peter but clearly says to Peter, "Get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate. I have sent them." Peter, it seems, needs this kind of clarity after that startling but really direct vision. And so, at least here, he obeys.

"Why have you come?" Peter asks. The men explained their errand and Peter invites them into the house to be his guests. He invites them into the home in which he is already a guest to be his guests. There's a lot of relational hospitality going on in this story. There's even a tablecloth full of food at the center of the revelation. There are houses full of guests. There's the welcome. There is hospitality. There is eating together. But there remains in Peter this beautiful sense of obedience to Jewish cultural laws. So even as he agrees to go with these servants to Cornelius's house—even as he steps foot inside the house of a Gentile—he starts his sermon to them with this disclaimer: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit with a Gentile." He's not quite comfortable with it, and yet, he can see the Spirit at work clearly in this space of hospitality and welcome. Peter's like, "I'm here. God told me to come, and God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." I process things out loud and that's how I imagined this going for Peter. He starts off by saying, "You know, I shouldn't be here, but God told me to come." He's kind of giving himself a little bit of an out, and then really it sinks in: "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."

Oh, church of Jesus, how many, times have you and I done just that? Told people—sometimes in as many words, and sometimes (maybe much more frequently) with our sideways glances, our exclusive language, our insider practices—told other beloved human beings created in the image of God that they are impure, unclean, unworthy, or unwelcome. How many times have our actions communicated that—instead of the truth that we should not call anyone impure or unclean that God has made clean?

"I should not call anyone impure or unclean. May I ask why you've sent for me?" Peter is finally starting to get



something right here. He begins with a question and then chooses to listen. There's a lot of beauty in the dialogue here; questions and answers and real listening is taking place. This is the generative kind of listening that gives the Holy Spirit space to break forth. Generative listening moves from a mere download of information. It moves through listening for new data that just might change your opinion. It moves through empathy with another's situation and into a space that allows new things to be generated, created, and birthed. It's a listening from the future that wants to emerge. It's a listening to the Spirit, emerging in the particular details.

Cornelius then tells the story of his vision and Peter listens. Cornelius narrates for him the directions that God gave; and then, Cornelius invites Peter to speak while they listen. In the presence of God, Cornelius says, "We are here to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." And he is not just there with those couple of servants who brought Peter along; Cornelius has gathered all of his family and all of his friends into his house. It is full of guests, full of Gentiles listening and waiting expectantly to hear what the Lord has commanded Peter to say.

Peter begins to teach. He says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." While Peter is still speaking, the Spirit is creating. The Spirit is poured out in those moments and in that space because Peter now realizes his vulnerable space and his limitations: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism. I now realize that it's not my job to determine who's in and who's out; it's God's. It's God alone who creates and calls and empowers this community of faith. I now realize that what I used to know to be true—that God, of course could call you, but he would do it only by making you convert to Judaism—I now realize that isn't the fullness of the truth. I now know that you are welcome to join this community without leaving behind your cultural particularities."

Sisters and brothers, this is a powerful word. This is a vital word. This is a life-affirming, life-giving word. You are welcome to join this family of God without leaving your cultural particularities behind. First Nations people in Canada and other Indigenous groups around the world were frequently told their culture needed to be left behind. It wasn't civilized, so it needed to die to

make space for civilization, for settlers, and often for the church. The official government policy here in Canada was something along the lines of: Kill the Indian to save the man. And the church not only participated but led in many ways through the residential school system that attempted to do just that—to kill off the culture.

Sisters and brothers, we must be very, very clear on this point. Jesus says nothing like this. And when we—standing in the place of the church, the body of Christ—have said things that lead people to feel that they must leave their cultural selves behind in order to be welcome in the body of Christ, we need to repent. God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right—what is just. And we are witnesses of everything he did. That's our task. It is God's to call and create and empower this community; it is ours to bear witness. To tell the story, to share our relationship with Jesus to those with whom we are in a relationship, to welcome others with hospitality around our tables, to eat together, to share our own hunger, and allow the Spirit to work, in those vulnerable spaces.

Peter bears witness, and he is clear that God's particularity matters. Peter says that Jesus the risen Christ was seen not by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen. He was seen by those who did what? Who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. It was that relational hospitality that you get around the table. Whom you eat with matters. It defined family and community in ancient times. And, let's be real, it still does today—hospitality, food, hunger, eating together, and telling the stories while we eat. Peter says, "Jesus commanded us to preach and to testify."

In the face of Peter's and his other Jewish friends' remaining doubts (we know there are still some doubts in there because they're astonished by what happens next), the Holy Spirit came down and made himself known by being poured out on all those who heard the message. Peter's task of bearing witness isn't done. But right now Peter gets to be the recipient of the witness born to him now by these Gentiles. Because they, by having the gift of the Spirit poured out on them, have now become and have now been shown to be vessels for God's voice, God's power, and God's presence in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit empowers them to speak in tongues, and Peter gets to be the one who listens and hears while they bear witness—while they testify.



It's going to take the church a few chapters to get all of this sorted out. Peter is going to slip back into the risk averse, conflict avoidant behaviors that he had prior to this incident. But thanks be to God, it doesn't end there. Thanks be to God, God has created and called and empowered this community, and the boundaries that we've put in place don't matter because it is God who is at work.

I remember being fairly young when I first articulated this idea that God existed in a box of our own creation. "And we put God in this box and God was capable," I said, "of acting outside of the box because he is God after all; but he just wouldn't. He just wouldn't act outside the box—because the box was where we were comfortable and he just wouldn't do that to us." Thanks be to God, that is not the truth. Thanks be to God, the boxes and boundaries that we create, God is in the business of smashing down and then holding together in the body of Christ. Thanks be to God that the Spirit continues to be at work when we refuse to obey. Thanks be to God that even though we are resistant, God's mission does not stop. Thanks be to God that Jesus loves everyone. *Chesus Kesage ka gadoh awenuk.* (Jesus loves everyone.) Amen.