

Sermon
January 8, 2017
FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY
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Peter began to speak to Cornelius and the other Gentiles:

*“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears him
and does what is right is acceptable to him. ...”*

This speech by Peter to Cornelius, says it all. This part of the story is from the Book of Acts. It is about the early church and its struggle to understand itself. And about the power that it is given, to do the work of God in the world, for the world.

In a pinch, when the stakes are most high, when you really need to say what counts, would you be able to sum it up, tell someone what is most important about your faith, your practice, your mission and purpose in life?

Would you be able to say it in such a way that it comes from your own heart and experience so that the person you are speaking to can hear the integrity of your convictions?

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When Cornelius, now known as the first Gentile Convert to the Christian Way, was standing there, face to face with Peter, the leader of the Jesus Movement—it was a critical moment in both of their lives.

And a critical moment for the Church. Peter was ready. You might say, Peter had his **elevator speech** ready. Or, that God was there—ready to inspire him, on the spot.

In my household, we joke with each other, when things look as if they’re going downhill fast—My son says to me, or I say to him, “Well, it’s not impossible, you could get lucky!” Sometimes you got a laugh. But it’s better to be ready, to be prepared. Better to have your “elevator speech” ready. To know what is important and how you want to say it.

An elevator speech is a term from the 1990s. In the early days of Web development, aspiring innovators prepared themselves for brief encounters with venture capitalists. If they could present their vision in a short span of an elevator ride, they might get the capital needed to bring vision to reality. If the conversation inside the elevator in those few seconds is interesting, engaging, **value adding**, as they say, the conversation will either continue after the elevator ride, or end in the exchange of business cards, or a scheduled meeting. It's all about getting your point across quickly. Better be ready with you elevator pitch!

When I look at today's Lesson from the Book of Acts, this is what I see—Peter, with his act together—his message ready, and Cornelius ready to receive, ready to listen.

*“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears him
and does what is right is acceptable to him. ...”*

This is a huge shift. And it's new. It's radical. It has **added value** to a world that desperately needs it.

It is Peter, in the Gospels, who confesses faith in Jesus, “Who do men say that I am?” And then, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. “You are the Christ! The holy one of God.”

Jesus lifts him, formerly Simon, and gives him a new name, Jesus calls him, Peter, “the Rock” upon whom he will build his church.” This is according to the Gospel of Matthew. It is Peter's confession. But today, in Luke's Book of Acts, we see more than a confession, we see a conversion. Actually, two conversions.

A confession is just the beginning. It is an awareness. It might even be formulaic, if you know what I mean. Like the confessions we repeat together: The Apostles Creed, or the Nicene Creed.

Something used as a profession of unity:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

I memorized it in 8th grade. It's a confession. But it's not a conversion. And doesn't work in an elevator! I wouldn't say it has much new or added value. A conversion is a change of purpose, a change of direction, leading to a new outcomes, new consequences, a new life.

What happened to Peter just before he made his inspired speech to Cornelius lead not to a confession, but a conversion. This is what happened:

First, we must set the stage. Things weren't easy. The One Peter confessed as the Christ had been killed. His colleagues were scattered for a time. They were struggling. The world was closing in around them. They had their good moments, and their moments of disaster. Peter is the one who confessed Jesus as the Christ. He is also the one who denied him, three times. Faith can be complicated.

Simon Peter was staying in the home of Simon the Tanner, in Joppa. While he was there, he went up on the roof top to have a moment of silence, rest, prayer. In that moment, he had a vision, a trance. I wonder if you have ever prayed like this. When times were particularly troublesome— you got on your knees, closed your eyes, and in prayer, were transported someplace else for a moment. Prayer can be trance-like.

The vision Peter saw was of a sheet, being lowered from the heavens, filled with all sorts of animals that were ostensibly food, but foods not permissible for a faithful Jew to eat. Foods that were considered “unclean.”

Simon the Tanner's home was “by the sea.” In Joppa. It was there that he was told to go to the home of Cornelius, a well-known powerful leader, but a Gentile. Keep in mind, that as a faithful Jew, if you went into a gentile home in those days, when hospitality was a social requirement, if you ate, you broke the law. It was simpler not to enter the house in the first place.

By the sea in Joppa, I imagine there were all sorts of shell fish, creepy crawlies, bottom feeders in that vision! Maybe Maryland crabs! Or rather, Joppa crabs. Pretty disgusting really. Unless you're from here!

The message in Peter's Vision was “to eat.” God made these foods clean. When he came to himself, and pondered the vision, Peter understood the message.

His conversion is this simple and this complicated:

***No man is unclean. No person is left out. God shows no partiality.
God has favorites. God has no non-favorites.***

This is a huge turning point in the life of the Church and in the history of the world. It is difficult for us nowadays to appreciate how wide the chasm was that separated Jews from Gentiles in that time and place. Or maybe not so difficult to imagine such chasms between people.

True, God promised that through Abraham he would bless all the nations of the world. True, the prophets promised a day when the knowledge of the Lord would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. True, there would be a day when the Gentiles would confess God as the true and living God, a day when all the nations of the world would find peace. True, there would be a day when God would pour out his Spirit upon all mankind.

But— what the common understanding was was that everyone would become like them. Change meant being alike—like me, that is! This is the way the world still thinks and purposes itself!

It is a toxic misunderstanding of biblical theology which becomes a witch's brew of racism and spiritual pride.

In those days, gentiles were referred to as "dogs," thought of them as idolaters, unclean and immoral. Name calling. Disregard. Prejudice. Hatred. Leading to punishment and abuse and violence.

In Joppa, Peter was converted, he was changed in a more dramatic way than we can imagine. Everything he had been taught, everyone he had been taught to avoid or despise, ... were all now children of the same loving creator and all were brothers and sisters of Christ, in the same household of God.

Peter's new conviction becomes his new purpose. "Everyone who believes" – that is everyone – irrespective of his national, social, racial, religious, or ethnic background – "receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

So deep was Peter's prejudice, that before his vision, he failed to grasp the fact that the salvation of Christ was for the world, not only for people just like him. No doubt Peter knew that in some sense, but not at a level that would eradicate his life-long prejudices.

It is the radically new vision and mission of the early Church. Peter was not the only one. Paul learns the same lesson. His experience was different, but his conversion was the same – and he writes it down beautifully in his Letter to the Galatians.

***There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,
nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.***

Epiphany as a season — is the time to reach out to the world. It is about having a change of heart, embracing a vision that honors and welcomes each person as a very special child of God. Not to make us each alike, but to give thanks to God for the uniqueness and rich variety of all God's people.

We have an elevator statement at Epiphany. It's been on the cover of our bulletin for years. I know it has helped to share who we are.

***We are a diverse community seeking to
embody and share the teachings and love
of Jesus Christ for all people.***

As we begin the new year, let's be prepared to share our mission. Let's live it, like we believe it!

Amen.

