

**“Ripples of Grace” First in the Series “Ripples: Draw the Circle Wide”**  
**Acts 10:1-17, 34-36**  
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**Acts 10:1-17, 34-36**

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. 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." He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?"

He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." 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, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next 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 it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

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.

Then Peter began to speak to them: "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. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all.

## Sermon

The Artemis II Crew members, who recently returned from their space mission around the **moon**, have shared their thoughts and feelings about what they experienced. They said that “looking back at the **Earth** from 400,000 miles away, no human-made borders, political divisions, or conflict lines were visible. When you see the Earth from space you understand that we’ve built a world based on separation, but in truth, everything is connected.”

Our scripture lesson for today from the book of Acts in the New Testament illustrates our human tendency toward separation and division.

Today’s account took place after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. It took place after the Holy Spirit had come upon the disciples and thousands of others, expanding the group of Christ followers rapidly. The “**ripple effect**” of Christ’s resurrection and the coming of the Spirit was growing the church of Jesus and embracing new people from “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and beyond.” (Acts 1:8)

However, while the circle of believers was growing wider, there were some who set limits on how wide the circle should be drawn. Some people were never to be in the circle.

You’ve heard now of the strange set of visions a Roman soldier who believed in God and Peter (a disciple of Jesus).

Cornelius (the Roman soldier’s) vision was less complicated than that of Peter. Cornelius was simply told to send for Peter and to invite him to his home. From our perspective, not a big deal.

Peter’s vision was cringy weird. Remember, Peter was steeped in Judaism and, like the other disciples, may still have envisioned their Christ follower movement as continuing as a sect within Judaism. This meant he and the others were still “keeping kosher.” They were still following the dietary laws of their Jewish identity.

Now we can see why his vision of foods considered unclean in the Jewish faith was startling and disturbing. Eat all that forbidden stuff? No way. That’s not my identity. That’s not who I am.

But a voice said three times: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” While Peter was still trying to figure out his rooftop experience, the men that the Roman soldier Cornelius sent to get Peter, showed up. The Spirit directed Peter to go with them to the home of Cornelius.

It’s important to note that this juncture that while Cornelius worshiped God, he was a Gentile. He was not an adherent of Judaism. It’s important to note that within Judaism some believed that Gentiles were not a part of the “circle.” But ringing in Peter’s ears was the message he had just heard: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

What happened next is also notable: When Cornelius saw Peter, Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet and worshiped Peter. I believe it is important that we recall what Peter said and did. He made Cornelius get up, saying, “Stand up, I am only

a mortal.” He was saying in no uncertain terms to Cornelius: I am not God. I am a human being. Don’t you . . . don’t you dare worship me.”

We do well to remember this. No mortal . . . no human is to be worshiped according to our faith. And no one should represent him or herself as God or Jesus. The first two of the 10 Commandments makes this clear: “You shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourself an idol.” (Exodus 20:3-4)

What Peter discovers is that there’s a whole group of people waiting to see him at Cornelius’ house. What he says next is also important: “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. So when I was sent for I came with objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?”

By then Peter had connected the dots of the unusual vision he received while he prayed. His vision wasn’t just about food; it was about so much more. It was about a change in perspective. It was a total change in how he now understood God’s grace and its scope. Peter began to see that the ripple effect of Jesus’ death and resurrection was to be ever-expanding and growing, including all people, not just people like him.

Cornelius told Peter they were ready to hear whatever God had commanded Peter to say to them.

And Peter said this: “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. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – **he is Lord of all.**”

Peter went on to recount Jesus’ life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and the command Jesus had given the disciples to spread the message.

While Peter was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard what Peter said. The Jewish folks who had traveled with Jesus to Cornelius’ home were surprised to see that what Peter was saying was true – the Holy Spirit didn’t show any partiality. The Holy Spirit didn’t play favorites. The Holy Spirit was poured out even on Gentiles. The Peter said: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” No one objected. How could they? (Acts 44-48)

I love this quote from preacher and scholar William Willimon:  
**“Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, ‘What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?’** (Acts in the Interpretation Commentary, William H. Willimon, p. 99)

God is always ahead of us. From the beginning God drew the circle wide. From the beginning God was dropping grace into the waters of life so that that the ripple effect of God’s love and grace would perpetually emanate and include all people.

We humans are always a few or many steps behind God. We are slow learners. It is true today that we are prone to keep the circle of grace small, contained, and limited. Unlike God, we show partiality. We pick favorites. We are clannish. We have a list of reasons not to include people and love people. We want to limit the ripple effect of God's love for all. We like to keep the circle small. Like the crew members of Artemis II noted: "When you see the Earth from space you understand that we've built a world based on separation, but in truth, everything is connected."

Some will argue that we need to preserve our identity. This is one of the more concerning things I hear from some people, including some Christians today. "We need to preserve our identity."

What did Peter learn? He had an identity as a Jew. But then he realized that his primary identity was a follower of Christ. What did Cornelius learn? He had an identity as a Roman soldier who had allegiance to the Roman Empire which demanded his worship of the emperor. But then he realized that his primary identity was that of a follower of Christ. That identity is to supersede all other identities. It marks us and shapes our lives. And if we are identified as those in Christ, then we must draw the circle wide as Christ did. We must show no partiality or prejudice. We must not exclude others or consider some people from some places as less than . . . as garbage . . . as disposable.

When we follow God's ways, we will at times be breathless trying to keep up with God's redemptive and all-encompassing redemptive, loving, grace-filled work. We will find ourselves asking what God is doing and why God is taking us along for the ride.

God has already drawn the circle wide. The ripple effect of Jesus' death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit is perpetual, ever-expanding. As individuals who are identified as Christians, will we join the Triune God in this breath-taking life?

It will be much easier if you say "NO." Keeping the circle closed and small is always easier. But I hope we will have open hearts and minds as Peter and Cornelius did and that we will continue to say "Yes" to all that God is doing. I pray we will say "Yes" to God moving us where he calls us to go, embracing all the people he embraces.