

July 27, 2014
Church Planting
Discovering God's Will
Acts 10:1-8

Opening words: Located in the top drawer of my desk is the 1994 Journal of the East Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. I have saved that particular edition because that is the year I came to Western Reserve. I use the figures in that journal as a benchmark. I am always trying to answer the question, are we making any progress? Generally, these have been good years for Western Reserve, especially in comparison to other United Methodist congregations in our district. The numbers don't lie. Generally speaking, Methodism is dying in the Mahoning Valley. The numbers are shocking. Everyone is trying to reverse the trend. Let me say this clearly. Our problem is not a lack of education, equipment or programs. In my opinion, our problem is more basic. Our church lacks the one thing that is needed for congregational redevelopment, the Holy Spirit. Our only hope of survival is revival. We need the Holy Spirit to wash through us again.

For this reason, I am donating a major block of time to the book of Acts. It tells us how the Holy Spirit created the church originally and I am hoping it will tell us how the Holy Spirit will revive the church again. I have called the entire body of work, *Church Planting*. This is sermon number eighteen in the series. I have called this message *Discovering God's Will*. This morning we find ourselves in the tenth chapter of Acts, the first eight verses.

Acts 10:1-8 ¹At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ 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!"
⁴ 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. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."
⁷ 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. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

There is an old preaching story about a man trapped on the top of his house during a flood. The water is swiftly rising. As this man sits on his roof, fearful of being swept away by the current, he cries out to God, "God, please deliver me." A few moments later, a farmer friend arrives with his boat. "Hey, friend, want a ride to safety?" he asks. "No," replies the man on top of his house. "God is going to deliver me." An hour later, the water is up to the gutters. A person comes by in a yellow raft.

"Hey, let's get you off of there—and on to safety," he yells. But the man on top of his house refuses to go. "God is going to deliver me." Another hour passes and now the water is halfway up the roof. Roof Man is now on top of his chimney, nervously looking down at certain death and destruction. Fortunately, a Red Cross volunteer swings by in a canoe and offers to ride Roof Man to safety. But Roof Man refuses. "No, God is going to deliver me." A couple of hours pass by and the water sweeps over the top of Roof Man's house. He is carried away by the current and drowns. When he gets to Heaven, he meets Jesus and says, "I thought you were going to deliver me." Jesus looks down at Roof Man and says, "I sent a boat, an inflatable raft, and a canoe—but you refused each one."

We know that story for one reason. It resonates in our soul because we all hunger to know God's will. If you have ever desired to know God's will, then this message will speak to you. If you have ever sought God's will, say, "**Amen!**" Let us look at this morning's scripture lesson together.

Last week we found ourselves in the town of Joppa. This week we find ourselves thirty miles north in Caesarea. That community was named in honor of Augustus Caesar and was the headquarters for the Roman forces that occupied that land. For this reason, the military was well represented in the population. One of the soldiers stationed there was a man by the name of Cornelius. We are told that he held the rank of centurion, so he is in charge of 100 men. That was an important position in the Roman army; they offered stability throughout the entire empire. However, there is more to Cornelius than his job. There was a spiritual side. Verse two tells us that he and his entire family were "God-fearing." What does that mean? It does not mean that he is a Christian. He had not yet been completely enlightened. He had not yet claimed Jesus as his Lord and Savior. However, he was close. He prayed to just one powerful god and gave to the needy. Those sincere acts impressed God. According to the text, at 3:00 in the afternoon, the time for Jewish afternoon prayer, Cornelius had a vision. He is told to get Peter and bring him to Caesarea. The centurion followed his orders and Peter came. The two men are united. The story is easy to understand. However, I have to make a confession.

I began working on this message last Sunday afternoon. When I read the text for the first time, one thing stood out. Cornelius's understanding of God at this point is limited, but his communication with God was perfect. God told him what to do and he did it. I read the text countless times, and each time I became more jealous of Cornelius. He didn't even see the big picture, but God spoke clearly to him. Why doesn't God speak clearly to me? Why doesn't God speak clearly to you?

It isn't just true of Cornelius, it is true of so many in the Bible. God is always communicating clearly with Biblical characters. How many examples do you need? In the story of Adam and Eve, the Bible says God actually walked in the garden with them. God talked to Adam and Eve face to face.

In the story of Cain and Abel, God spoke directly to Cain and asked him why he was upset. God spoke directly to Noah. God said, "I am going to put an end to all the people." God spoke directly to Jacob and Joshua. God spoke directly to Samuel and Solomon. God even spoke directly to Hosea and told him to marry a prostitute. God spoke directly to the crowd at Jesus's baptism. Do you remember? God said, "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." God spoke directly to Peter, Andrew, James and John at the transfiguration. He said, "This is my Son. Listen to him!" God even spoke directly to that heathen, Saul, on the Damascus Road. God is always speaking to people in the Bible, but seldom speaks directly to us.

The more I read about Cornelius and the others, the more I wondered why God doesn't speak to us. It is almost like we are being ignored by God. A word every once in a while wouldn't hurt. Wouldn't it be nice for God to say, "Good job," when you were driving home from a soup kitchen? Wouldn't it be nice if God said, "Thanks!" on the way home from the trustee work day? Wouldn't it be nice to have God to say, "Thanks for remembering," early on Easter morning or late on Christmas Eve? Wouldn't it be nice for God to say, "I am proud of you," at the instant you wrote a generous check to help feed someone in the Third World? A word of encouragement is always accepted. A word of acceptance is even better. The problem is, God doesn't say a single word. We spend our lives struggling to discern what God wants us to do. We spend our years struggling to hear God for one reason, Satan. The Adversary does an excellent job of frustrating our communication with God. If you have ever spent time trying to discern God's will, say, "**Amen!**" That brings us to a very interesting question. Do you really want to know what God has to say?

One of the most known stories in the Bible is the story of Jonah. He is remembered as the reluctant prophet. You remember his story. In the first few verses, God spoke to him directly. God said, "Go to the great city of Nineveh." Jonah's problem wasn't that he didn't understand the words. His problem was he didn't like what he heard. He doesn't want to go to Nineveh because the residents aren't like him. He was a Hebrew and they were Gentiles. Generally speaking, the Hebrews hated the Gentiles. They were considered nothing more than kindling for the fires of hell. For this reason, Jonah runs away from Nineveh. He goes to Joppa and catches the first boat that is going in the opposite direction, Tarshish. With that story in mind, let me ask you this question.

Do you really want to know what God has to say? They may not just be words of love and acceptance. They may be difficult words. God may want you to do something you don't want to do. Like Jonah, God may want you to love someone you have always hated. God may want you to forgive someone who has not forgiven you. God may want you to sacrifice for someone else's child. God may want you to go to a place that can't offer you security. God may want you to stay in a place when all you want to do is go. **Do you really want to know what God has to say?** Like Jonah, you may want to run in the opposite direction. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

One of the great things I have in my life is my calling into the ministry. I don't know why God called me. There are certainly people more intelligent and gifted. However, I do know God did call me and has given me the gifts to succeed. No one enjoys their job more than I. No one is more passionate about their job than I am. If I look back on my life, I can hear my calling clearly from the very beginning. However, when I was younger, it wasn't so clear. If I could live my life over again, I would go from high school, college, Seminary and out. That isn't my story. When I graduated from college, I got a job. Do you know what I did? I worked in a bank. I can honestly tell you I hated every single day. I consider those days my "wilderness experience". When I left the bank, I sold ad space for a newspaper. I found that to be pointless. However, I did enjoy the relationships I had with my customers. I surrendered to God when I was twenty-five years old and enrolled in Seminary. Do you know why I didn't go to seminary right out of college? I was afraid of public speaking and I was filled with self-doubt. Doesn't God has a sense of humor? I am now addicted to preaching, and am confident I will succeed. I have very few regrets in my life, but those lost three years are one of them.

The other night I read an article that spoke to me. I wish I would have read it years ago, when I was trying to discern God's will for my life. It was written by a man by the name of Ron Edmondson. The article is called *Five Questions to Discern God's Will*. Edmondson says that when you are facing a choice to ask yourself five questions. If you answer them honestly, then you will be closer to God's will for you in that particular situation. These are the five questions.

- 1. Does what I am considering conflict with scripture?** That means you actually have to read the Bible. There is something about reading the Bible that stirs us spiritually.
- 2. Does what I am considering conflict with the counsel of others?** I am not just talking about any friends. I am talking about spiritually mature Christian friends - people who love you enough to tell you the truth.
- 3. Does what you are considering conflict with the spirit within you?** In other words, how does it feel to you? To a point, emotions can be trusted.
- 4. Does what you are considering conflict with your life experiences?** Life is one big classroom. You have experienced all kind of things in your life. Have you experienced anything like this in the past? What did you learn from that experience?
- 5. Does what you are considering conflict with your passion?** Our passion and our purpose go hand in hand. Are you excited about it?

Maybe if I would have asked those five questions years ago, I would not have lost three years of my ministry. Time should never be wasted. I believe, next to Jesus, time is our second greatest gift. God spoke to Cornelius, and he knew what God wanted him to do. We aren't so fortunate. We are going to have to work on it. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

In 1802, President Thomas Jefferson sent James Monroe to France. The President was hoping to buy the city of New Orleans to open up the Mississippi River for shipping. The French were willing to sell much more. They were willing to sell the entire Louisiana Territory. The territory covered 828,000 square miles at a cost of approximately \$15,000,000. The problem was, the constitution did not give the President such power. Jefferson was in a difficult spot. He had to act quickly to seize the opportunity. Did he let all that land go at a bargain price, or did he follow the letter of the law of the constitution? In 1803, he bought the land, doubling the size of the United States. Over two hundred years later, I think it is safe to say he made the right choice. Is every choice you make correct? Satan is doing an excellent job of frustrating our communication with God, but that does not mean God isn't speaking. We just need to work on it a little harder!

Will you pray with me?