

August 17, 2014  
Church Planting  
*Everyone Welcomed!*  
Acts 10:23b-48

**Opening words:** This is sermon number twenty in my sermon series called *Church Planting*. I am preaching through the Book of Acts. It will take me several summers to complete. Why give so much time to Acts? Because, it holds the key to our future success. The Holy Spirit created the church originally, and I hope the Holy Spirit will revive us again. Without the Holy Spirit, we have no future. Our churches are failing, not due to a lack of programs or supplies. Our churches are failing because we are living without the life-giving part of the trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember where we were last time? The Centurion Cornelius, a military man, had been told by an angel to send men to Joppa to bring back Peter to Caesarea. The distance between Joppa and Caesarea was thirty miles. As they were nearing the end of their journey, Peter ascended to the flat roof of a home. At that time every home had a flat roof for privacy. Peter wanted some privacy to pray. According to the text, it was noon. Peter's prayer was interrupted by hunger. In this state, he had a trance. He saw heaven open and a large sheet descend. On it were all kinds of animals. God tells him those animals were his lunch. Peter protested because those animals broke the dietary laws of the Old Testament. God responded by telling him those laws no longer applied. Everything that God made was good. The only thing that mattered now was Jesus. This week we learn that it is not just true of food, it is also true of people. Our scripture lesson for today is Acts 10:23b-48. Let me call the message *Everyone Welcomed!*

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**Acts 10:23b-48** The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. <sup>24</sup> The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. <sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." <sup>27</sup> While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" <sup>30</sup> 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 <sup>31</sup> and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. <sup>32</sup> 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.' <sup>33</sup> 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." <sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> “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, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. <sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> 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. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” <sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” <sup>48</sup> 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.

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One of the great iconic figures in American history was Confederate General Robert E. Lee. He had a brilliant military mind and was loved by his country. Once the Civil War was over, he wanted to live on his own farm. That was impossible, because he was a regional hero. Instead, he became president of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia. He served in that position until his death in 1870. He was 63 years old.

There is an old story about Lee near the end of his life. He was in Washington DC. Those were religious times in America, so on Sunday morning he decided to go to church. It was Communion Sunday, so Lee went forward for the elements. As he was waiting to be served, a black man knelt beside him. Some in the congregation were shocked. An onlooker said to Lee later, "How could you do that?" Lee replied, "My friend, all ground is level beneath the cross." If you can understand that simple story, then you can understand this morning's message. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

We are in the tenth chapter of Acts. According to the text, Peter arrived in Caesarea and Cornelius was waiting for him. Peter had rock star status. When the two men meet, Cornelius is so blown away that he falls at Peter's feet. Peter thinks this is ridiculous and reminds him that he (Peter) is only a man. Two thousand years later it is hard for us to see, but they were not just two men. They were a Jewish man and a Gentile man. That is not a big deal to our little corner of the world, but to their world it was shocking. Peter reminds the group that had assembled that their meeting is actually unlawful (10:28a). If it is true in the previous story about food, then it is true of people in this story. Nothing that God makes is impure or unclean (10:28b).

By the end of the reading, both men had told their stories. Cornelius told about the angel's message (10:30-33). Peter told them about Jesus (10:34-43). God must have been pleased with those words, because the Holy Spirit arrived, and everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter knew it all along. God does not show favoritism (10:34). He ordered these new spirit-filled Gentile believers to be baptized with water in the name of Jesus Christ. That was a good thing! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

That is a fun story to preach and it is an easy story to understand. You do not need an advanced degree to get the point. Through the eyes of God, everyone is the same internally. Everyone needs forgiveness and salvation. Everyone needs hope for a better future. However, that does not mean that through the eyes of God everyone is the same externally. All you have to do is look around. Look at all the different kinds of people there are in the world. There are various races. There are various generations. There are many nations, so there are numerous political views. There are the extremely wealthy and the homeless. There are males and females. There are heterosexuals and homosexuals. There are people who are limited, and people who are whole. When you mix all those things together, one thing is perfectly clear. There are as many different kinds of people as there are people. The church must be diverse to speak to our diverse world. The problem is, the church has always struggled with diversity.

History tells us Mahatma Gandhi read the Gospels seriously during his student days. At one point he even considered becoming a Christian. He believed the teachings of Jesus were the answer to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So one Sunday, he decided to attend a Christian service and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with "his own people". Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus, but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior. Maybe that story is the story of the church today?

Maybe the thing that we love about our church is the same thing that frustrates God about our church. We are all basically the same, but God is always looking for a diverse church to minister to our diverse world. In the text for today, the Gentiles added some diversity. How diverse is Western Reserve? Let me ask you these four questions. There are more, but these will clarify the point.

**How many races are represented at Western Reserve on an average Sunday?** The answer is one. That may be fine with you, but God is looking for diversity. God needs a diverse church to speak to our diverse world.

**How many generations are represented at Western Reserve on an average Sunday?** Through the eyes of God, the higher the number, the better. The church was never meant to be a senior citizens center or a childcare facility.

We need all generations. The church is the last place where all the generations mix. God needs a diverse church to speak to our diverse world.

**How many political views are represented at Western Reserve on an average Sunday?** Do you think Obamacare is the best thing to ever come down the road? Do you think Obamacare is the worst thing that has ever happened to our country? God needs a diverse church to speak to our diverse world.

**How many theological viewpoints are represented at Western Reserve on an average Sunday?** Are there any liberals in the crowd? Are there any conservatives in the crowd? Has anyone here mixed their faith with their patriotism? God needs a diverse church to speak to our diverse world.

It goes directly back to the scripture lesson for today. In the early church, everyone was the same, Jewish. Then came this story. Peter had the audacity to bring in not just a new person, but a new kind of person, a Gentile. That was a good thing because the world was filled with Gentiles. We are Gentiles, non-Jews! The church must be diverse to speak to our diverse world. Can I be honest with you? Diversity has never bothered me.

One of the reasons I can work with anyone is, I went to high school with everyone. I didn't think much about it then, but I do now. Every portion of society was represented at Warren Harding in the mid-1970s. There were students with white faces and students with black faces. There were students who came from white-collar homes and students who came from blue-collar homes. There were students who spoke only English. There were students who spoke Spanish. There were students who spoke Greek. There were students who were being raised by their parents and students who were being raised by their grandma. There were students who came from the richest part of the community, and students who came from the projects. There were preacher's kids and children whose father or mother was incarcerated. There were students who had a bright future, and students who had no future. At Warren Harding in the mid-1970s, every part of society was represented and no one really cared. We were used to the diversity. It was expected. We laughed at schools where everyone was the same. I got a wonderful education in Warren, but the most valuable thing I learned was how to tolerate others. When I get to heaven, I am going to thank my parents for not sending me to a school where everyone was the same. The diversity I experienced as a teenager made me a better adult. I was prepared for this diverse world.

Several years ago, I was celebrating my birthday. It is the custom in my home that the birthday person gets to pick the restaurant for the celebration. Since it was my birthday, I got to pick. I usually shy away from chain restaurants and pick a restaurant that is locally owned. That year, I decided we were all going to Charlie Staples, on W. Rayen Avenue in Youngstown. I love those ribs because they are cooked with a "cup of love". As the day got closer, I got more excited. I could taste those ribs.

When the day came, I was the first one in the car. When my daughters got in the car they asked me, "Dad, where did you pick to have dinner?" I said, "Charlie Staples; their food is prepared with a cup of love." As we drove to the restaurant, the closer we got, the quieter the back seat grew. As I left my white world and drove into the city, they weren't talking at all. Then a small voice in the back seat asked, "We are in the hood! Are we going to die?" Those words cut me to the heart.

I had deprived my children of something my parents gave me. My children had never experienced diversity. They were raised in an all-white community. They went to an all-white school. In their school everyone spoke one language, English. We went to an all-white church and all their friends were white. All their extra-curricular activities were filled with white faces. The only thing they knew was white. The only thing they knew about the non-white world was what they saw on television or heard from racist white people. As I ate my birthday meal, I was ashamed. I felt like a failure as a parent. I always knew they should have gone to Harding. I learned the most valuable things in life at Harding. They weren't close to entering a society where people were different from them. I am glad they grew up to be wonderful, open minded women in spite of me. Can I ask you a question?

How comfortable are you with diversity? Are you going to spend the rest of your life surrounded by people who are just like you? Are you brave enough to experience something new? God needs a diverse church to speak to our diverse world. Never forget the old American proverb, "variety is the spice of life".

Will you pray with me?