

Sunday, April 11, 2021

Breaking Walls; Building Bridges

(Reimagining Church Series; Message 22)

(Marks of a Believer)

Acts 10

Review (Slide): Reimagining Church...

August - focused on prayer and waiting...

September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November - focused on the Church's mission

January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

February - focusing on the marks of a believer - talked about a personal relationship with Jesus and being in community.

April - continuing the marks of a believer this morning - learning from God...

Scripture:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ²He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³One 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!"

⁴Cornelius 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. ⁵Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

⁷When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

⁹About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw heaven opened and something like

a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹²It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

¹⁶This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷While 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. ¹⁸They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

²¹Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

²²The 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." ²³Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. ²⁴The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

²⁷While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸He 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. ²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

³⁰Cornelius 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 ³¹and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³²Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.'

³³So 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."

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸how 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. ³⁹"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, ⁴⁰but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ 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. ⁴²He 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. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." ⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." ⁴⁸So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Message:

During the few weeks since we left our study of Acts (and Reimagining Church) the headlines have changed. Some *walls* have been reinforced; numerous *bridges* are still under construction.

There was a Muslim suicide bombing in front of a Christian Church that left the bombers dead and numerous worshippers injured.

There was a grocery store shooting in Boulder that left ten dead; it has sparked protests about gun violence and laws and the second amendment's right to bear arms.

Attacks on Asian Americans in the United States have increased dramatically since the start of this pandemic. Fueled by a recent mass shooting involving

Asian Americans in Atlanta, protests regarding the treatment of Asians have erupted across the nation.

Immigration has long been an issue on our southern border. Large numbers of unaccompanied minors have been attempting to cross the border – at a higher rate than ever before. Customs and Border Protection, Health and Human Services are overwhelmed. There is considerable debate about appropriate protocols.

Derek Chauvin's trial, the officer accused of "murdering" George Floyd, began last week in Minneapolis. The national guard has been deployed to try and keep the peace, as the nation awaits the outcome.

Our governments – especially state and national – are experiencing gridlock, the results of significant political polarization; democrats detest republicans; republicans detest democrats.

In our world, people are adept at building walls and breaking bridges. People find it very difficult to get along with other people who are not just like them. Problem is, on many issues, we can no longer even talk together. We are a nation, we are a world, on edge - impacted by fear, **suspicion**, distrust, prejudice and **racism**. Is it any wonder people are afraid, suspicious of people who are **not like them?**

I grew up in a white, middle class, traditional family in a medium size mid-west city (Grand Rapids). My father was a Christian School teacher; I went to a Christian Day School; we attended church twice every Sunday. It took me years to realize my world was a small, isolated part of the real world.

After graduating high school, I spent the summer working at Northside Chapel, an inner-city Chr. Ref. Church in Patterson, NJ that ran a heroin addicts rehabilitation center next door. The members there looked quite different from me: politically, economically, socially, and racially. I was forced to confront the "they're not like me" issue for the first time.

While in College and Seminary (I went to Calvin), a significant majority of the students came from backgrounds similar to mine. The I went to graduate school, and for the first time I was a minority in the classroom. I was again confronted with the "they're not like me" issue.

Today, it happens regularly. Our world, our nation, even the Church longs for direction and answers to this nagging issue. The Church is held to a different and higher standard than the world.

Jesus never said - "*Love your neighbor if they look like you, think like you and act like you*" He said, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Let me translate: "treat those who are different than you just like you'd treat yourself." This is, in fact,

a very hard saying; it challenges our paradigms. It is one thing to embrace the idea theoretically; it is quite another thing to live it out.

In Acts 10, Peter is forced by God's Spirit to face his personal prejudices. In this chapter, the Spirit also challenges us to face our personal prejudices that keep us at a distance from believers and unbelievers who are different than we are.

The reality is, every one of us possesses tendencies that **build walls** (and break bridges) that separate and divide us; all of us have those tendencies. The Bible calls those tendencies sin; and the Bible says everyone one of us sins.

Sometimes it is the color of their skin, their nationality or ethnicity; sometimes it is their political leanings, their sexuality or their marital status. Sometimes we resent their wealth, envy their influence, or reject their lifestyle. Sometimes it may be their faith: they are Catholic, or Muslim, or Mormon, or Buddhist, Jewish or nothing at all.

Jesus was pretty clear when he said: *"Go into the world making disciples of **all nations**"* (i.e., all kinds of people).

THE PEOPLE

Peter (a leading disciple of Jesus!) is a **prejudiced and self-righteous person**. Peter is **Jewish** and he "hated" (and that is not too strong a word in this context) **Gentiles** (so, literally, everyone who wasn't Jewish). Growing up he was told: *"You're better than everyone else!"* (*"If you're not Jewish, you're not much!"*)

If a Jew touched a non-Jew - even accidentally - they were considered *unclean*. No self-respecting Jew would ever invite a Gentile into their home; they would never enter the home of a Gentile - they believed it defiled them.

The Mishnah (the commentary which told how Jews should live) forbid Jews from assisting in the birth of a Gentile because it would be bringing another Gentile into the world! The Jews believed they were God's only chosen people - and therefore, they were better than everyone else.

When Jesus said, *"Go into **all** the world and make disciples of **all nations**"* the disciples - all Jewish - heard *"Go and make disciples of the **Jews** in every nation."*

That was okay; that felt right; that was comfortable; that felt relatively safe for the disciples. For the first ten years of the church, they focused on Jews (the people like them) while basically ignoring everyone else. Truth is, they were building more walls than bridges. (And, for a time, God tolerated it).

Then comes Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman, a military guy (it doesn't get much worse to the Jewish mind). Although he was not a Christ-follower,

Cornelius prays to God, has a compassionate and generous heart, and would generally be considered “good people.” The reality is, Cornelius and his family are **lost**; they don’t know Jesus. That’s very **sad**. But even sadder is that **no one** in the early church seemed to **care** they were lost.

In **Acts 10:3**, Cornelius is visited by an angel: “*Your prayer has been answered! Send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon...He is staying with Simon the tanner whose house is by the sea.*” Cornelius does. A not-yet-Christ follower obeys God!

(Also observe that God has been working to softening Peter’s heart; Peter is staying by a **tanner**! Tanners work with **dead** animals; so a tanner is perpetually **unclean**; he would have been despised; and Peter is staying by his house!)

God, the primary character (act-er) throughout Acts, is working out his **preferred future** for His people. The DNA of the Church needs to be reset.

THE PLAN

God sends Peter this vision of a large sheet filled with all kinds of creatures:

*“About noon the following day as they were on their journey...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 of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and **eat.**’” (Acts 10:9-10).*

This sheet is filled with *non-kosher* foods; these foods were all forbidden in **Leviticus 11** and **Deuteronomy 14**. Jews don't eat these things! These are forbidden!

But now God says, “*Peter, put some bacon on your LT.*” “*Have ham with your eggs.*” “*Try the BBQ pork ribs once!*” “*How about shrimp scampi?*”

Peter: “*That’s not happening, Lord! I’m not eating something **unclean!***” (It’s never a good idea to say “no” to God but it shows how deeply entrenched this tradition is. I wonder sometimes how often we say “no” to God for the sake of maintaining some of our traditions).

God replies, “*Peter, **don’t ever** call anything impure that I’ve made clean!*” Peter is thinking about food he can’t eat; God is thinking about people Peter needs to love.

If God lowered a sheet in your dreams...who or what might be in it? Who and what do you love?

God showed Peter once. Then God showed Peter again (Twice)! And then God showed Peter a third time (God knows Peter! Remember the time Jesus asked Simon Peter something three times? The question was, “*Simon, do you love me?*” “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” “*Simon, son of John, do you really love me?*” cf. **John 21:15-17**). God knows Peter. God knows us!

Then Luke notes, “*While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision...*” So Peter still doesn't really get God's point - even after God has said it three times!

Then there are three men knocking at the door. (God's timing is always impeccable!)

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*” (**10:19**).

Peter may be thinking - “Oh, no, an interruption! And they're probably Gentiles!” But God is the expert at making us face His **preferred future** head on. These people are (quite) different than Peter; and now he has no choice but to face them.

God's preferred future for his people is a community of **wall breakers** and **bridge-builders** rather than a group of **wall-builders** and **bridge-breakers**.

Peter is suddenly confronted by the real world and he has no place to go. There are three Gentiles at Peter's door. He invites them in to be his guests! (God left him little choice!). Imagine what his (Jewish) neighbors are thinking!

Bridge building is always costly; especially when it involves ethnic bridges, economic bridges, and racial bridges.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus sought to include people from the other side of the wall; it was a major factor in religious leaders call for his crucifixion. The bridge God is asking Peter to build will be a **costly one**.

It will cost Peter his **pride**, his self-righteousness, his ego, his **prejudices**, his reputation (just to name a few). He will be criticized and when he returns to Jerusalem, he will have to defend himself.

The next day Peter leaves with a few fellow church members and Cornelius' men to go to Caesarea; it's a two-day trip; Peter is keeping company with Gentiles! (People like Us! We're Gentiles!).

Notice this first step - they **spend time together** - two whole days! During that walk, Peter discovers they're “normal” people (This is God at work!).

When they arrive in Caesarea, Peter is again faced with a hard choice - will he enter the house of a Gentile, a Roman, a military leader, a non-believer.

Here is another line; once you cross it, you can't go back; he will pay a price for bridge-building. Peter walks through the door and, perhaps for the first time in his life, Peter is in the minority.

Peter is on God's fast track; he is beginning to learn more quickly.

Cornelius sees him and falls at his feet; Peter says, *"Stand up, I'm only a man myself."* Peter is learning - the differences aren't that big; He's learning: Jesus is Lord of all. What Jesus says, disciples do!

Tony Evans, an African American pastor in Dallas, says, *"No matter what ship we came over on, we're all in the same boat now."*

Now Peter takes a second step: *"Tell me your story, Cornelius"* (We all have a story).

"You are all well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. 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" (10:28).

So, I'm here. Tell me why you called? Cornelius tells his story. Peter **listens**. And Peter **learns**: *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation that fear him and do what is right!" (10:34-35).*

Then, third, after listening, Peter **shares** his story - **the Gospel**; Peter tells them how Jesus changed his life. We need to learn to share the Gospel, our story, and love others with enough love to love them into the kingdom. We need to love people in Jerusalem and Judea (Jews), in Samaria (half-Jews), and now in the world (full blown Gentiles - people not at all like us!)

It's hard for us to understand what a dramatic shift this was for Peter - but God is calling His church to be a gracious and enfolding community for everyone - those who are like us and those who are not.

Peter is now inviting people to be his brothers and sisters that a few days before he wouldn't even consider being in the same room with. This is God's preferred future. How do I know? Look at **10:44** - *"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message."*

Peter recognizes God's preferred future, obeys, and steps out on a limb to build a bridge. He baptizes Cornelius and his family in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These once hated Gentiles are now his brothers and sisters - forever.

They ask Peter to live with them for a few days. He does. Final step: **Life together**: Ham sandwiches. Lobster bisque. Ribs. Sweet potato pie. Sushi.

Kimchi. Spending time with our (unlike) neighbors breaks down walls; builds bridges.

Paul would write: *“He himself is the reconciler who makes the many groups one and destroys the dividing walls of hostility...His purpose is to create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace and to reconcile us together to God through the cross.”* (Ephesians 2:14-16; paraphrased)

Don't miss that our text is more about Peter (and the Church) having to address their prejudices than about Cornelius and his family coming to Jesus.

Individuals coming to Jesus is an **amazing** event; but building a bridge so people groups and entire nations can come to Jesus is **incredible**. Jesus knows in order to build his Church, we will have to build **bridges** instead of **walls**. But it comes at a cost. It came at an incredible cost for Jesus – his life; it will cost his disciples as well – their lives.

THE PREJUDICES

(1) We need to face our prejudices. We all have them; we all need to identify them, admit them and address them.

It is not enough to just talk about them or just decide to do something. We need to step out, take the risk, actually do it - believing it is God's preferred future for us.

Our neighbors' eternity is hanging in the balance. Do we really care? Do we know our neighbors? By name? Are we praying daily for them? Have we ever had a conversation with them? Invited them over to our house? Do we care enough to do something? If we're not moved to do something, we really don't care (i.e., love our neighbor) very much.

(2) We need to be willing to pay the price to build the necessary bridges.

Don't forget the price it cost **Jesus** to build a **bridge** to you - you and I are Gentiles. If all are not welcome - none of us would be part of his family. If the barriers and walls were not **broken**, if bridges had not been built, the Church would have no **Good News** - no gospel message of grace, of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of unity, of hope, or of love.

The Christmas angel said, *“I bring you good news of great joy that will be to all people.”* That includes the most conservative Republicans and the most liberal Democrats; citizens and aliens, people like Peter and like Cornelius; you and for me...and the people you and I struggle to love - for everyone.

This was a huge paradigm shift for the early church. It's addressed again in **Acts 11**. But it is clearly, God's preferred future for His Church. Sadly, Sunday morning is still remains the most segregated time in America.

(3) We need to **obey God more than maintain our **comfort** and follow **tradition**.**

What does it say when our desire to be comfortable prevents us from sharing the Gospel with those who aren't **mirror-images** of us - but are fully **image-bearers** of God?

Are we willing to embrace God's preferred future by embracing people who not just like us? Follow his agenda? Are we willing to pay the price of obedience and embrace the vision of a church from every nation? Every race. Every economic level? Every language?

Paul says, "*In Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ...he has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...reconciling them to God through the cross...*" (**Ephesians 2:13,14,16**)

Christ brought us together through his **death**; the **hostilities** have to go. This is God's vision for his church - this is his **preferred future** for us.

In the early 60's, a little white first grader, boarded the bus for her first day at her newly integrated school. (It's part of the Ruby Bridges' story). Her mom nervously met her when the bus dropped her off after school: "How did it go, honey?" "Oh, mom, do you know what?" she said. "A little black girl sat next to me." Knowing this was a new experience for her daughter, her mom asked, "What happened? The little girl said, "Oh, we were both so scared, we held hands all day."

It's God's preferred future for his church to be actively breaking walls and building bridges where we hold each other's hands because we really believe **everyone matters** to **God**!

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