



The Last Person I Thought I Would Need

TEXT
Acts 10

June 11, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

My grandfather was named Ward, but we called him “Boss.” He wasn’t really a boss. Well, he did live with her, but when he talked with you, he spoke with an air of confidence — even certainty.

He had no hobbies. He never caught a fish. He never hit a ball. In the yard, he only did what was required. He *was* his work. So even as an 8-year-old, he would talk to me about the art of sales. He was a paint salesman, and he sold paint supplies to hardware stores in upstate South Carolina. I remember being riveted by the wisdom of this man. He knew everything — or so it seemed to me as an 8-year-old. I loved his certainty about things.

When I was in college, I bought a car from him. We stood in his front yard, at the edge of their circle drive. The car door was open. He asked me, “How are you going back to school?”

“Well, I’ll take I-20 to I-26 and get off at the Laurens exit.”

“You can’t do that,” he said.

“I can’t?”

“No, for goodness’ sake, you don’t want to drive on the interstate.”

“Well, I came that way, and it saved 20 minutes.”

“No it doesn’t,” he said. “You want to take 178 through Saluda and all the way to 39, and then 39 on in. Watch the speed trap in Cross Hill.”

“Boss,” I said, “I don’t want to take the back roads. It takes forever.”

“No it doesn’t. Now go to Saluda; that’s the best way.”

“OK,” I said ... as I headed to I-20.

I loved his certainty, particularly when I was unclear myself. But when I saw something a different way, his certainty about things seemed small. It’s interesting to me that the same characteristic, his certainty, I found winsome or small — depending on where I stood. Does that make sense to you?

I’ll come back to that.

This story of Peter and Cornelius may be Peter’s best moment. He has a lot of good moments in his life. Peter was one of the first disciples called to follow Jesus. “Come and follow me.” Peter dropped his nets and followed him. It was a big decision with a lot of questions, but he followed.

And Peter followed Jesus when he walked on water. He got out of the boat and followed him. Of course, he began to sink after a while, but for a moment

he was walking just like Jesus walked.

And Peter was the one who confessed it first: “We know who you are. You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That was a really good moment.

Of course, things weren’t always great with Peter. The Bible is honest that way. When Jesus taught his followers that he must be handed over and crucified, Peter told him that simply couldn’t happen. Jesus called him Satan. It is safe to say this was Peter’s worst moment.

And by that courtyard fire, when the full power of the empire was posed to crucify Jesus — and who knew what they would do to those who followed him — Peter, caught up in fear, said, “I do not know him.” That moment is understandable, I suppose, but Peter could barely live with himself afterwards.

And it was to Peter, there on the seashore after Jesus had been raised, that Jesus said, “Peter, feed my sheep.” He gave him a ministry. Nothing could be more redemptive to this flawed follower. He had many great moments, but this may have been his best.

Peter had a vision. *A sheet comes down from heaven, and it is filled with all kinds of ani-*

mals. It's important to remember that faithful Jews were kosher. They didn't eat meat that was deemed unclean (shellfish and pork, for example). Eating was a spiritual practice. It was how they practiced their faith. It's what it meant to follow God's law.

So this vision is confusing — because it encourages Peter to do what Peter's faith had taught him not to do. It was confusing.

And then things get more confusing. Peter is summoned by Cornelius. There are two things you need to know about Cornelius. The first is that he was visited by an angel, a messenger of God. That doesn't happen every day. The other thing you need to know about Cornelius is that he was Gentile. Peter was a disciple of the first order. Peter had followed Jesus from the first day. Peter was the definition of an insider. And Cornelius was a Gentile — one not included among the people of God, it was assumed. So it had to be confusing when Peter was asked to visit in a Gentile's home.

When Peter arrives, it becomes clear that neither of these men know what they are doing there. Peter has had a vision and Cornelius has been visited by an angel, and yet neither one of them knows what God is doing. They need each other. Cornelius is the last person Peter would think he might need, but it becomes clear that Peter's understanding of God is too small.

Peter asks, *Why did you send for me?*

Cornelius says, *The angel of God told us to listen to what you have to say.*

Peter says, *Well, you know it is not right for me to be with you. It is not lawful, according to my faith, for Jews to visit with or associate with Gentiles. But I will tell you about Jesus.*

And he does. And the Spirit comes, and Peter's eyes are opened to see something he had never seen before. He realizes that this is what that silly vision was about. Not calling a creature of God profane does not simply apply to food; it applies to people. To God, we are not Jew and Gentile; to God we are God's children. So Peter baptizes Cornelius and his family.

And Peter is as shocked by it as any. This is his best moment, I think. This is a moment when Peter stands tall as confusion washes around him.

This is a lesson for all of us all the time — because all the time things are shifting. Yesterday's certainties are today's questions. The wisdom of childhood sometimes crashes on the rocks of maturity. Things about which we can be so clear, even certain, will get challenged when we pause to listen to someone who does not view the world the way I view the world.

When we find ourselves crossing the boundaries we thought were sacred, the response is often to double down on what we know.

Boss said, "You can't take the interstate; that's not as good as 178." Of course this is a man who had never driven on the interstate but once, and that

was by accident. He mistakenly turned onto an entrance ramp near Columbia and within 10 minutes was pulled over by a state trooper for going 35 miles an hour.

When the officer asked my grandfather, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" my grandfather said, "No doubt because I was the only one you could catch. People are driving like crazy on this road."

He never got on an interstate after that.

Sometimes when the world changes around us, we just double down on what we know and assume it is all that can or should be known.

That's how Peter begins. *It is not lawful for me to associate with you. This is what I know of God: God wants us to be separated.* That's what he says.

But something pushes Peter, and he opens himself to the last person in the world he thought could teach him anything about God. And Peter discovers for the first time the full work that God was doing in Jesus Christ. Christ reveals God shows no partiality. There are no people more important than another people. We are all God's people.

This moment is how you and I got included in the church — because the Spirit pushed Peter, the pillar of the church, to see everything anew.

There have been many moments like this for the church. It took us a while to realize that God shows no partiality between men and women — yet there are still today some churches that would not let Jenny McDevitt

or Hallie Hottle stand in their chancel. That is a loss for them.

It took us a while to realize that when it comes to race, God shows no partiality, yet even today we hear in increasing frequency and boldness and from high places that we do not belong to one another, that race divides. It is doubling down on yesterday's certainty.

It has taken the church a long time to recognize that sexual orientation is not a determiner of righteousness. God cares about how we love. And yet today, there are too many churches that have doubled down on the assumptions of yesterday and closed their doors to the LGBT community.

But this is something we have learned: The Spirit will not let the church rest. It is not OK for us to treat tomorrow as yesterday lived all over again. We are called to grow.

Now it is easy to look through the rearview mirror and see with clarity what was difficult to discern in the moment. But I think that this story is important for you and me now. We live in a time when everything seems to be changing at lightning speed. And I have full confidence that the Spirit of God is just as busy today as she was with Peter and Cornelius.

In a different way, we are doing something new today. We are doing something today we have never done before. We will meet as a congregation and choose to welcome, with grace and hope, brothers and sisters from the Presbyterian Church of Stanley.

We don't know exactly where this road will lead, but I am confident of this: The Spirit will ensure that we learn from one another. And if we pay attention, this just may teach us how to be more faithful — and who knows, it could be our best moment.

One thing is sure: The Spirit never lets the church sit still. Every day is another day to live toward God's promised day.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.