Homily for Oct. 27, 2024 Acts 10, selected verses “King-Sized Sheets for a Twin Bed World”

**THE FIRST READING** At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 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!” 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. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.” 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. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

**THE SECOND READING** About noon the following day, as Cornelius’ men 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 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 and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While 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. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. 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.”

**THE THIRD READING** Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?” The 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.” Then 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. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.” While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 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. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?” Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying, and suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer! Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. 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.”

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**THE FOURTH READING** Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation those who fear him and do what is right. 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. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— 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. “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, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 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. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tonguesand praising God. Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Ahhh…welcome to the home stretch, the final sermon of eight from our beloved Book of Acts. It was promised that everything you need to know about our Christian faith would be shared in these eight weeks, and I truly believe we are about to accomplish that goal. As usual, we have saved the best for last...and that is saying something, considering the world-changing, heart-warming, faith-enhancing stories we have enjoyed thus far. Let’s get to it, and we will start with a little geography.

There are two principle human players in this wonderful saga, the Roman centurion *Cornelius*, who was headquartered in Caesarea, and the apostle *Peter*, who was at that time staying with friends in Joppa. The distance between these two coastal cities is almost exactly the same as going from here to Live Oak; not too bad by car, and since our Bible travelers made it in about 24 hours each way, they must have been on horseback. Better than on foot, right...35 miles or so, three days hard journey with no tourist stops or gadding about. These two cities have reversed roles, historically: Caesarea was first introduced to Christianity by our friend Philip, remember him?, who later had a house there where he frequently hosted [Paul the Apostle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle). In today’s story it was here to Caesarea that Peter came and baptized [Cornelius the Centurion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelius_the_Centurion) and his household, the first time Christian baptism was conferred on Gentiles. And this was a *big deal* because by then, Caesarea had replaced [Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem) as Rome’s civilian and military capital, and became the official residence of its governors, notably Pontius Pilate. In 1961 Caesarea was the place archaeologists discovered the [*Pilate Stone*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilate_Stone), the only archaeological artifact that mentions the Roman prefect by whose order Jesus was crucified. Pilate used Caesarea as his base of operations, and only went to Jerusalem when needed. So Caesarea was a *Roman* town, friends, big and prosperous with a port as large as the Greek port of Piraeus, adjacent to Athens. But I mentioned a historic reversal, because as significant as it *was*, Caesarea did not survive to the modern age, and is now just ruins and historic digs.

Joppa, on the other hand, was a modest port town south of Caesarea, not a big deal to the Romans, down in Judea with all those Jewish subjects. Not as schmancy as Caesarea, up in Samaria, where Jews were much less common. But things have turned around for little old Joppa; I will spare you the blood-soaked history, but Joppa is now the oldest part of Tel-Aviv, a city with almost exactly the population of San Francisco, and like our city on the bay, currently the most desirable and expensive place to live in the Middle East. In today’s tale, Peter went from the not-yet epicenter of modern Israel to the really Roman city of Caesarea, to share the news of Jesus beyond the edges of Judaism. This story is one of those ‘hinges of history’ you have heard about and probably lived through. Sharing about the resurrected Jesus in the same city recently ruled over by the man who condemned him to death was quite a move, but not the biggest move. That, as we shall see, was the expansion of the message of the Gospel to include *all people*.

I believe in mercy, so we aren’t going to trot through the whole tale again. The synopsis is this: Cornelius gets instructions from an angel to send for Peter down in Joppa. The next day, while the Caesarian emissaries are still on the road, Peter is praying and hungry for BBQ and has a vision, not once or even twice, but three successive times, a large sheet being lowered before him, full of animals of all kinds, many of which this devout Jew would *never* consider eating. But the heavenly voice assures him that what God has made clean, *is* clean. And before he can really sort this out, Cornelius’ men arrive. They spend the night – hospitality was a thing back then – and return north the following day, taking their time a little bit, and by the time they arrive, Peter has settled on his foundation-shaking interpretation of the vision. Good thing, too, since Cornelius has gathered a houseful of people, *Gentile* people, to hear from the Jewish leader of the Jerusalem church. Peter reminds 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.*” So, they tidy up a bit, and finally we are ready for the meat of the story. Since Peter gives pretty much his usual sermon here, I am going to condense it a bit, and here it is:

*“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation those who fear him and do what is right.*Full stop. Hinge of human history.  *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ.**You know what has happened throughout Judea, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing because God was with him. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the One. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”* Full stop again…remember the Pentecost experience in Jerusalem, how all the messianic Jews were filled with the Holy Spirit? Well, buckle in, because God is about to do it again, but with *Gentiles* this time. “*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message.**The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out*even on Gentiles*.**For they heard them speaking in tonguesand praising God. Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.*

It is literally impossible to overstress the importance of what happened that day in Caesarea. Rather than remaining a remote, miniscule sect of Judaism that would likely not have survived the Roman Empire, the inclusion of all faithful people everywhere allowed Christianity to become the most practiced religion in the world. And the principle of God dismissing this barbaric, thoroughly *human* notion of clean and unclean still reverberates today, at least among us who have gotten the memo…

Yet here, in America, nine days before a national election of great import, there are many who blatantly and aggressively choose to ignore this Biblical concept. They go, shrouded or proud, under the banner of Christian Nationalism, and as more than one wag has remarked, they are interested in *neither* Christianity *nor* the national good. They are interested in power, and white supremacy, and patriarchal control in every aspect of American society. And since those things would be impossible to enact in a country founded on religious freedom, their stated aim is to destroy the democratic system and replace it with their narrow version of our historic faith. For them, the fact that God has declared cleanliness and wholeness through the blood of Christ is irrelevant. They have plenty of unclean, unsaved, unwelcome folks on their list: women, people of any color but white, non-heterosexual people, poor people, it’s a big list. The principle that was good enough for Peter isn’t good enough for them. In their minds, they are superior to others because they are white and male and wealthy and the true Americans, and they plan to rebuild the rubble of society in their own perverse image.

I set out on this eight-week journey through the book of Acts because I saw parallels between its world and ours, a world where the Church I love has to contend with a rude, dismissive, demonizing portion of society. A world where people’s goodness and worth are routinely judged by the color of their skin, by their biology, by whom and how they love. A world that has gotten less inclusive, less tolerant, and less safe unless you are one of the good old boys. And I thought that the lesser-known stories contained here would be, for us, an infusion of courage and strength. Tracing the expansion of Peter’s understanding, lamenting the brutal and senseless death of Stephen because he insisted on a bigger vision; following Paul’s transition from persecutor to preacher, jogging along with Philip as he opened the doorway to eternal life for the Ethiopian eunuch, and finally today, the message that America needs to hear right now, that we don’t have to settle for a twin-bed world when God only makes king-sized sheets! After fifteen years together you *know* that I labor for an apolitical pulpit, that I will never tell you how to vote. But I can and *must* share with you the Biblical witness from another time in history when the faithful were at great risk of being hemmed in by organized smallness in the name of religion. You can settle for the twin-bed version of reality that is being offered, or you can upgrade. Just know that if you do go for broader, bigger, more generous, more compassionate, more inclusive, that you are centered in the love of Christ, not penned for slaughter by the love of power. Amen.