



Preaching Restorative Justice

This week's preaching text is another in our series of "Rarely Told Tales" from the Bible. It is the story from the Book of Acts about the conversion by the Apostle Peter of a man named Cornelius. In many ways it is an obscure story from an often overlooked book in the Bible. About the only time you or I think about the Book of Acts is on Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the arrival of the Spirit as the third part of the Trinity, and that happens in the first two chapters. After that, we all tend to skip to the philosophy of Romans and the poetry of Corinthians. But in fact the Book of Acts, including the story of Cornelius, is central to how we understand who we are as Christians.

The story takes place in those chaotic days after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Most of the Apostles are still in Jerusalem, desperately trying to figure out what it means to be a Christian; desperately trying to figure out what it means to be the Church. The charismatic former persecutor of Christians—Saul, now called Paul—has just joined the group. There is an unmistakable tension in the claims for leadership of the early church between the pastoral Peter and the evangelical Paul. These days we might say that Peter was more concerned about the care of the congregation and Paul was more concerned about church growth.

The specific question facing the early church was "Do you have to be a Jew before you can be a Christian?" Of course Jesus himself and all the disciples had been Jews. Jesus had always described his ministry in Jewish terms, using the language of the Hebrew scriptures. How could you understand Jesus without sharing His heritage? On the other hand, what was the meaning of His command to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations"? *Those* people in *those* places outside Israel were clearly not Jews.

If you were Peter, Cornelius was not the kind of guy you would want in your church. He was Italian. He was a high-ranking officer in the Roman army, the army that was oppressively occupying Israel and persecuting Jews, the army that had, in fact, carried out the execution of Jesus. He was a gentile, a non-Jew. He did not know the Jewish scriptures. He did not know the Jewish laws. He did not know the Jewish traditions.

He was—and the story is very clear about this—the ultimate outsider. But the story is also very clear that he was a good guy; not just a *good guy* but in the words of the text "a thoroughly good man." He helped the poor. He prayed, and he was kind to the people who worked for him. But he was still a gentile Italian officer in the Roman army living in Caesarea, a town built by Herod and named after the God/Emperor, Julius Caesar.

One afternoon Cornelius had a vision. An Angel appeared and told him to send for Peter. So he sent three of his men up to road to find Peter, who was staying in the little town of Joppa. It is important to the story that he sent for the more conservative Peter and not the more theologically-flexible Paul, who was all for accepting Gentiles.

Peter also had a vision. He had a dream of a giant tablecloth descending from heaven. On the tablecloth were all kinds of non-Kosher food; things like ham, shrimp, lobsters and birds. A voice from heaven tells Peter to go ahead and eat the food. But Peter, who was still living under the Jewish dietary law, says no because it is against his religion. The heavenly voice tells Peter that if God says it is OK to eat the food then it is OK to eat the food. While Peter is trying to figure out this dream, Cornelius's men arrive and ask him to come to Caesarea.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house. He sat down and asked Cornelius to tell him his story. Peter then realized that it was the Holy Spirit that had brought them together. In hearing Cornelius' story he understands his own dream about non-kosher food. Peter now realizes that in this new world the old laws do not apply and that God is doing a new thing. Whoever is acceptable to God must be acceptable to the Church. In the dramatic climax of the story Peter baptizes Cornelius.

That is the last we hear of Cornelius. We don't know if he stayed in the Roman Army of occupation. We don't know if he continued to persecute Jews and Christians. We don't know if he was part of the Roman Army that destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

We do know that Peter took a fair amount of criticism from his more conservative Christian brothers for baptizing a non-Jew. This criticism and the debate over whether you first had to be a Jew before you could become a Christian would continue until the first church council where James, the brother of Jesus, decided that non-Jews would be welcomed into the Church.

The story of Peter and Cornelius was on my mind this week when Susan Heneman and I went to the prison at Redgranite with our friend Peg Wallace. Peg was there to tell the inmates in our Restorative Justice program the story of the murder of her 89-year old grandmother and two other elderly women, who were kidnapped and beaten to death twenty years ago as they left a charity luncheon in a small town in rural Pennsylvania. For no apparent motive, the women were beaten with such violence that their hearts literally exploded. The man convicted of the murders is still on death row in Pennsylvania.

Peg was there as part of our dialogue with the inmates about the wider effect of crime. Most of the men in our group will never have an opportunity to talk with their specific victims, so in an effort to help them understand the way being a victim of crime ripples through a person's life, I ask people like Peg to come and tell their stories.

I know it is asking a lot. I am asking people to come into a prison and share the story of the most personal and painful experience of their lives with a group of men who have committed similar acts of violence on similar victims. But Peg wanted to come. Peg is my neighbor. Our kids went to school together. I often walk our dog in front of her house in the summer time and admire her

gardens. But I had no idea about her grandmother's murder.

Peg told me and Susan that she had "stalked me" for two years, getting up the courage to ask me about what to do with her memory of the murder. When she did ask, I offered her the possibility of telling her story in prison. She thought it over and decided that she wanted to come.

But as the day got closer, Peg got more nervous. Could she do it?

Could she physically go inside a prison?

Could she bear to hear the doors slam shut behind her?

Could she sit on hard plastic chairs in a circle with men so alien from her, men who had committed their own rapes and murders?

Could she be in that space and tell her story?

When we randomly took our seats in the circle of chairs in the prison chapel, Peg sat next to an inmate, a black man in his mid-thirties from Milwaukee. (It is probably worth noting for the story that Peg is a sixty-year-old white woman who was thirty-six when her grandmother was murdered by a thirty-six-year-old black man.)

Before we got to Peg's story we spent some time talking about the people—beyond the immediate victims—who are harmed by crime. We went around the circle, passing the talking stick to each person and asking for their ideas. When the talking stick came to the young black inmate sitting next to Peg, he broke down in tears. He told about how his mother and his younger brothers had been killed in a home invasion in Milwaukee while he was in prison. They had each been tied up and shot in the head. His mother had been the last to die.

Through his sobs, he cried out like Job in powerlessness in the face of unspeakable evil.

Through his sobs, he cried out like Job in guilt that he had not been there to protect his family.

Through his sobs, he cried out like Job in complete abandonment.

In that exact moment, in the midst of his sobs and pain, he and Peg formed an immediate and obvious bond. For the next three days, all the inmates made sure that Peg and the young man from Milwaukee always sat next to each other. That's where they were when Peg told her story.

On our way home from Redgranite on Friday, I asked Peg how she felt. She said she was relieved and that in that room, with those inmates, she had found a community that could uniquely understand her story. She was going to call her mother and tell her what happened, and she knew her mother would be grateful.

Stories have power. Stories are the beams that support our lives and our faith. The stories of Peter and Cornelius and Peg and the young man from Milwaukee have a lot to tell us about how God wants us to act toward those outside places in our lives and in our faith.

The first thing we need to do is *pay attention*. God might be trying to tell us something about those outside places. That small still voice might be in a dream about a giant tablecloth from haven, or it might be in our neighbor walking his dog.

Then we must *act*. We must act on what we hear and feel—or even on what we *think* we hear and feel—about those outside places.

Then we must *go* to that outside place, whether it is the Roman army post in Caesarea, the prison at Redgranite, a bombed-out house in Gaza City, the presidential place in Tehran or Saddleback Church.

When we get to that outside place, we need to *ask* the people we meet to tell us their story and we need to ask them to *listen* to our story.

Then and only then will we know if the same spirit is moving each of us.

The message this morning is not complicated theology. The message this morning is not rocket science. The message this morning is as simple as a plastic chair in a prison chapel:

To be a Christian means we pay attention,
we go to the outside place,
we sit,
we listen to their story,
we tell them our story,
in the sure knowledge and absolute faith that God will take it from there.
Amen.