

50 DAYS: WEEK 6

Who's In and Who's Out? (Everybody's In!)

By Kathy Neufeld Dunn

Peter and Cornelius Acts 10.1-48

Biblical Background:

Cornelius was from Caesarea. As a Centurion (commander of 80-100 troops) in the Italian Cohort, part of the Roman Legion, he would have been expected to worship Caesar Augustus along with his men, and in his own time, he might have also worshipped a Roman war god, perhaps Mars or Mithras. But not Cornelius. Apparently he had gotten to know and appreciate his neighbors and their faith, for he openly worshipped Yahweh, the God of the people he protected or oppressed, depending on which side of the fence (or which cultural group) you were on. In Acts 10, he is described as "devout," along with his household. He had several men under his command who believed as he did. They all prayed several times daily. Most devout Jews prayed in the morning, afternoon, and before sleep. Cornelius and the others also donated regularly to the poor. Cornelius' messenger described him as a "God-fearer." That was a technical term indicating that Cornelius' Jewish neighbors recognized him as a Gentile, but a Gentile who followed most of the Law of Moses. "Gentile" can either be a simple descriptor of anyone who is "not a Jewish person" or it can imply "an outsider." It may have been, as a "God-fearer," the only thing Cornelius had not done to fully convert to Judaism was to be circumcised. Cornelius' messenger also described his boss as "well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation." That sounds like a bit of an exaggeration, but it did indicate that his Jewish neighbors knew him and respected his faithfulness to Yahweh and his care for those in need.

Simon (nicknamed Peter or "Little Rock") was living on the outskirts of Joppa with a leather tanner. Peter was formerly a fisherman, but he gave that up when he became a follower of Jesus. Peter was a devout Jew (or at least he followed Jewish law as best as he could, given the fact that he was a normal working man). The full 613 laws in Peter's day would have been nearly impossible for anyone other than a priest to follow, but he was committed to his faith as he had learned it from his rabbi and Lord, Jesus. Because he followed all of the rules of the kosher Law of Moses that he could, he did not eat non-kosher food, and he was never hosted in a non-kosher household, until he met Cornelius, because by doing this, he would have broken many of the rules that made up the Law of Moses by then.

God gave both Cornelius and Peter visions. These visions were to prepare them for meeting each other and were to help them begin to understand that with God there are no insiders and outsiders. God loves everyone and wants everyone to be an insider, inside the family of faith.

Here were two devoutly faithful people (and their family and friends) from different cultures, different walks of life. In another context, if the Holy Spirit had not introduced them to each other, they might have seen the others as enemies, or at the very least NOT as potential companions in faith. The Holy Spirit brought them together and they were transformed, and God's mission of the good news shown in Jesus was expanded beyond imagination.

Day 1: Visions & Spiritual Discernment: Acts 10.1-23a

(Or “How Do I Know If It’s a Message from God or If I’m Seeing Things ‘Cuz I’m Seriously Hungry?!?”

Adult and Youth:

Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever had a dream or a vision that you believe came from God? Did you share it with anyone? If so, how did it affect those you told?
- What steps do you take when you are trying to figure out if what you are considering doing is what God wants you to do or not? (These steps are also called a process of spiritual discernment.)
- Have you ever had an encounter with an angel (also known as a messenger from God)? Tell your family the story. What convinced you that it was an angel? How did this encounter affect you or transform your life and faith?

Video: “Peter and the Vision,,: a humorous and biblical take on Peter’s vision by *Ted & Company Theaterworks* <https://www.tedandcompany.com/videos/peter-and-the-vision-video-download/>

Video: “Acts 8-12” by *The Bible Project*. This gives a broader overview of the growth of the Early Church from a small, local group of messianic Jews to a multi-ethnic movement! If you want to limit your viewing to the Peter and Cornelius story, it’s at 3:00-4:17.

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/gospel-series/>

Children:

- Act out Peter’s response to the angel and the sheet full of animals. You can also record it to a smartphone with Dad or Mom’s permission.
- Guess what some of the unclean animals might have been that Peter didn’t want to eat. Draw a picture of them. Then read (or ask someone to read to you) Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 to check if your animals are clean or unclean.
A clean animal is okay for a Jew to eat and an unclean animal is not okay to eat according to kosher religious rules.
- Practice praying. Begin each prayer time with a special sound. When you, Mom, or Dad ring a certain bell or singing bowl, you know it’s time to become quiet and pray. You can pray any of these simple prayers: “Thank you, God for ...” and finish the sentence. OR “God, I need your help with...” OR “God, I’m sorry for...” OR “God, I love you because...” or simply be quiet for a bit.
- Prayer Sticks: A color-coded way to pray! <https://buildfaith.org/prayer-sticks/>

Day 2: Spiritual Discernment 2: You Can't Do the Hard Work of Spiritual Discernment By Yourself

Acts 10.23b-33

Adult Discussion Questions:

- What steps does your congregation take to discern God's will when they are considering a very important matter? Are there any other steps you hope your congregation uses in the future (e.g. fasting, silent meditation)
- Have you ever participated in a "Clearness Committee," a group of friends and elders you ask to meet with you to help you discern a very important subject, like vocation or marriage or a possible move? If so, how was it helpful or not helpful to you?

Video, "The Quaker Practice of Discernment," (5:17 min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfIG2m7dAk8>

"Seeking God's Will Together: A Congregational Study of Biblical Discernment," David Boshart, Central Plains Mennonite Conference. This resource has both a digital booklet and several videos.

<http://www.centralplainsmc.org/discernment-study.html>

Youth:

- Ask a friend your age, an adult you trust, and maybe a grandparent or Aunt/Uncle to all get on Zoom or Skype or FaceTime together to listen to you as you try to imagine what God wants you to do after high school or university, especially in this time of uncertainty. Let them tell you stories about how they made important decisions. Listen for any surprises, and anything that brings you joy or anything that makes you anxious. These might be signs of God's guidance. Pray together, too, and see if you have a clearer sense of what to do next.

Children:

- Ask your mom or dad how they made some important decisions, like which house to buy, how they chose the pet(s) you have, how they decided on the job or work they do, why they decided to follow Jesus. Did they pray about their decision? Did they talk with anyone else to help them decide?

Day 3: Hospitality for the sake of mission: Acts 10.31-33

Adults:

- If you want to get to know a neighbor or a neighboring couple, invite them to your backyard for a casual gathering at your fire pit. Limit this to 2 households or 4 adults total. You stay on one side of the fire, your neighbor(s) stay on the other side. Each household brings their own drinks and/or snacks, so with at least 6' between you, this is social distanced hospitality. Many people enjoy such a casual setting instead of a full-fledged meal at first anyway. You can bet you'll have at least one topic in common to talk about!
- Read *Invited: The Power of Hospitality in an Age of Loneliness* by Leslie Verner or another book on hospitality and mission, so you'll be ready to go when the time is right.

Youth:

- Do a "neighboring" survey. Draw a 3x3 grid, so you end up with 9 1" (or larger) blocks. In the center block, write in your family name. Fill in all the names of the neighbors you know around you. What have you and your family done to get to know your neighbors before Covid-19? What do you want to do later on when it's safe to do so?
- Deliver "I Can Help" cards or ½ sheets of paper to your neighbors. Make a list of ways you would be willing to help older people or people with compromised immune systems (e.g. walk your dog, clean your windows, mow your lawn, go to the grocery store) and invite your neighbors to circle the ones they'd like help with. At the bottom of the card, write what date you will be back to pick up their answer. Also add Mark 12.31 "Love your neighbor as yourself." Put this in an obviously new sandwich bag. You can also include a bread tie, so you and your neighbor can secure the bag to their front door knob for no-touch delivery.

Children:

- Draw a hopscotch pattern on your sidewalk with sidewalk chalk for other kids (and maybe adults) to enjoy.
- Draw a big picture of something you're thankful for in God's good creation. Put it up in your front window for others to enjoy. Maybe they'll be grateful, too.
- Ask Mom or Dad what hospitality means if you do not know this word. How did Peter show hospitality to Cornelius' messengers? How did Cornelius show Peter and his friends hospitality?
- If your church has a "Blessing Box," or your family has put up a tiny loan library, put hand sanitizer bottles or Clorox wipes in it instead of books right now.

Day 4: When to obey God rather than the (religious or civic) rules?

Adult/Youth Discussion Questions:

- Peter believed that God was asking him to break a rule for the sake of God’s love reaching more people. When have people in the Mennonite Church broken laws (i.e. committed civil disobedience) for the sake of God’s love? Give specific examples. If you want more information, go to these links:
<http://mennoniteusa.org/tag/civil-disobedience/>
https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Civil_Disobedience
- Tell your child(ren) or grandchild(ren) a story of when your family or your congregation or others you know took a radical stand, even being willing to be arrested for the sake of God’s love being shown. Examples may include choosing to not register for the military draft, standing with others who are trying to protect sacred land from a pipeline that could potentially damage the land, standing up for immigrants in detention centers, withholding a certain percentage of your taxes that would go toward military financial support and putting that money in the Peace Tax Fund instead, quietly refusing to leave the State Capitol without having a chance to talk with the governor about how health care legislation would affect the poor, etc.

Children:

- If a friend asked you why Peter let Gentiles into his house when that was “against the rules” of Moses’ Law, what would you say? How would you explain that it’s sometimes right to obey God rather than human law?
- Ask your Mom or Dad to tell you a story. When have they thought about breaking or actually broken a law because they love God and their neighbors so much that they were willing to take the punishment to make things right or to get the law changed? (Breaking a law to get the unjust law changed is called civil disobedience.)

In our country, Civil Rights protests were often illegal, but for the sake of everyone having rights, instead of just some people, white and black people did some things that were against laws that were unjust. They broke the bad laws to get the nation’s attention to change these laws. See this video to learn more:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKEGou1zPII>

Day 5: Watching for and Listening for “God sightings” in community: Acts 10.34-44

Adults/Youth Discussion Questions:

- If you had been one of the Twelve or another witness, how would it have affected you to talk and eat with the risen Christ?
- Peter shared “God sightings” with Cornelius and his friends and family. Share some “God sightings” that you have seen or experienced during the pandemic/stay at home time.

Children:

- Be a “Detective of Divinity.” When have you seen or heard God at work in your family or church life this week? (Examples: Someone was helpful to someone else, someone was kind, someone

stood up for someone else who was being bullied online, God gave you a great idea when you were praying, etc) *Draw a picture or write a poem about it or act it out with Lego people.*

Video Song: “Detectives of Divinity” by Bryan Moyer Suderman. Go to YouTube. Search for “Detectives of Divinity” and “Bryan Moyer Suderman.” 23.25-24.25 for the song!

Day 6: Sharing good news with others: Acts 10.34-43

Adult/Youth Discussion Questions:

- How might God use both the new ways we have been church together recently and the traditional ways, too, to spread the good news? God used the persecution of the early people of the Way (Jesus’ followers) as a way for the Way to spread way beyond Jerusalem.
- What’s your “elevator speech” if someone asked you to tell them about the good news? Or respond to 1 Peter 3.15 “Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope you have. Be ready to give the reason for it. But do it gently and with respect.”
- What is the first thing you want to do (assuming it’s safe) to share good news with others in your community? Online?
- Discuss Palmer Becker’s definition of Anabaptist faith: “Jesus is the center of our faith. Community is the center of our lives. Reconciliation is the center of our work.”
- Want to read more about Becker’s understanding of Anabaptist-Christian faith convictions? Here’s the whole article: <https://www.mennonitemission.net/Downloads/DL.MissioDei18.E.pdf>

Children’s Conversation with Family:

- What is it like for you to visit a new person’s home (before Safe At Home)? Are you happy and excited? Scared? A little of both? I wonder what Peter was thinking about as he was walking on his way to Cornelius’ house, a place he had never been before? Talk with Mom, Dad, or a sibling as you take a walk around your neighborhood.
- If a friend asked you what Christians mean when they talk about the “good news” of Jesus, what would you say? How would draw it?
- In your own words, practice telling the story of Jesus that Peter told in Acts 10.34-43.

Day 7: Unexpected gift of the Holy Spirit poured out: Acts 10.44-48

Adult/Youth Discussion Questions

- What gift of the Holy Spirit did Peter and his friends witness that convinced them that the Holy Spirit was there among Cornelius’ people for sure and that they should be baptized?
- The spiritual gift that Cornelius and his people received is only one gift that Paul believed that the Holy Spirit gives. Discuss which gifts of the Spirit God has given you. (Read 1 Corinthians 12.1-11, Ephesians 4.11-13 for more spiritual gifts.)
- What evidence did Peter and the others share with the Jerusalem believers in Acts 15 that the Holy Spirit had come to the Gentiles?
- Discuss who might be seen as “Gentiles” or “outsiders” today in our congregations.

- Share an experience when you were surprised that a group of people that you thought could not be believers showed evidence of following Jesus?

Children

- Balloon Rocket: You can't see the air pressure that makes the balloon move, but we can see the effects. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/311522499200758241/> We can't see the Holy Spirit, either, but we can see the effects—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
- What would it be like for you to hear Mom or Dad or a brother or sister suddenly speaking in a language they didn't know?! Talk about that with your family. This is the sign that Peter saw that convinced him that the Holy Spirit was there with them, even the Gentiles (the outsiders).
- What sign did Peter use to turn "outsiders" into "insiders?" (Hint: It involved water!)
- Run around under your sprinkler and think of God's love for you raining down on you!