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90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit
By the Spirit We Are Diverse
Acts 10

On Wednesday night, a young white man walked into a prayer meeting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. After spending nearly an hour with these folks who welcomed him into their midst, he pulled out a gun and shot and killed 9 people. The 21-year-old white suspect reportedly hates black people and was heard to say, "You all have to go."

This evil act—as well as the incidents of unrest in Baltimore and other cities in recent weeks—only illustrates that, despite many gains, race continues to be a polarizing issue in this country... and in the Church, too. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." How are we as followers of Christ called to respond to the divisive and sometimes murderous issues of race and prejudice?

We can start by looking to the early Church. Because, as we discover in Acts 10, they were dealing with issues of racism and prejudice back then, too. As a reminder, Saul has been shipped off to Tarsus for safe-keeping after attempts on his life. Now, Luke swings his camera from Saul to another conversion that will shake the Christian world.

¹At 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 of the earth and birds of the air. 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 have you 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 brothers from Joppa went along.

[Tell the story of his arrival; how Cornelius falls to worship him, Peter preaches. Continue with Luke's story.]

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 the Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷"Can anyone keep these people from 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.

Cornelius was a powerful and wealthy Roman officer. But he rejected the pagan gods and, with his whole family, devoutly worshiped the God of Israel and was respected by the Jews for his kindness. One afternoon, an angel appears to Cornelius telling him to send for a man named Simon Peter living in Joppa. The last time Joppa was mentioned in the Bible, Jonah, the reluctant prophet, had gone there to hop a ship and escape from God so that he didn't have to preach to the Ninevites, the most brutal people in the world.

Now Joppa reappears and we discover another reluctant prophet: Peter. God gives him a vision, too. A sheet filled with all kinds of animals including those a good Jewish boy would never touch. Animals such as pork and shellfish were considered by Jews to be unclean and repulsive. So when God offers hungry Peter a feast of baby back ribs and lobster, he doesn't exactly jump at the chance. In fact, he acts just like we would expect Peter to act: He argues with the Lord. "Surely not, Lord!" Wow! Is that ever the response you want to offer when God invites you to do something? Three times Peter refuses to eat unclean things even though God tells him it is okay to do so.

Of course, Peter's vision isn't essentially about unclean animals. It is a metaphor for unclean people... the Gentiles. This vision prepares Peter for his trip to Caesarea where he meets Cornelius and Gentile family and friends who are eager to respond to the message of Jesus. In fact, Peter doesn't even finish his sermon before the Holy Spirit falls upon these Gentiles, just like at Pentecost. Surely, this was a divine confirmation to Peter of what was unthinkable to any devout Jew: God wished to save Gentiles, too. Jesus had come as the Savior of the whole world, not just the Jews.

But this shouldn't have been a surprise. God called Abraham to be a blessing to all nations. Throughout the Old Testament, this promise is repeated. Isaiah 42:6, for example: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness... I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles..."

And this was clearly Jesus' mission. Many times he traveled outside of Jewish territory to preach and minister to the Gentiles. Remember when he cast the demons out of the man named Legion? Where did he send them... into a herd of pigs. Why were there pigs... because it was a Gentile village. The Jewish Messiah cared about Gentiles, too!

From the call of Abraham, God made it clear he had chosen the Jews for a mission to the world, but over the centuries, the Jews began to see themselves simply as chosen... the favorites of God. Not only did they lose sight of their mission to the Gentiles, they came to despise them. They called them "dogs." Gentiles were just curs—undeserving of God's compassion or Jewish kindness—and too polluted for a Jew to dine with!

So when we turn to Acts 10, we discover a religious and cultural collision that will hit the early Church like a tidal wave. The conversion of Cornelius and his company opens the floodgates. Soon, the gospel of Jesus will travel to Antioch where a great Gentile church will form... and they will send missionaries into the rest of the Gentile world. In fact, the Gentile church is about to eclipse the Jewish church with Paul as the great champion.

Notice, there were really two conversions in this chapter. Cornelius and Peter, of course! As always, the Lord has to arm wrestle Peter to force him to believe what

would have been unbelievable to any Jew at the time... that God actually loved Gentiles as much as he loved his chosen Jewish children. It is hard for us to understand how vast the gap was between Jew and Gentile. Think of the relationship between black and white in the Jim Crow south, or between Nazi and Jew in World War II, or between Muslim terrorist and Israeli today... and you begin to grasp the hateful chasm that existed. Yet God calls Peter to go, dine with, preach to—and lead into the Kingdom—Cornelius and his entire cohort of Gentile family and friends. Amazing!

Diversity is a buzz word today. Corporations and universities and governments hire Diversity Officers, provide diversity training and set diversity targets. We act as if diversity is an innovation. Could I point out that diversity was God's idea—the God who created a diverse world, who called Abraham to reach out to that diverse world, who sent his Son to die for that diverse world, who sent His Holy Spirit to indwell and empower diverse believers. And Revelation 7 offers a glimpse of our diverse future in heaven. "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."

Acts 10 reveals a picture of a church that is as diverse and colorful as creation itself—the work of an eternally creative God. I want to look at two things this teaches us about diversity in the Church. First, diversity is not the goal, it is the outcome. Diversity in the early church didn't happen because Peter assigned Thomas to be the apostle of diversity and developed a diversity initiative to reach out to the Gentile world. On the contrary, Peter was dragged into a diverse church kicking and screaming. Remember his response, "Surely not, Lord!"

Then how did God grow His diverse church? By lifting up Jesus... Jesus once said, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto myself." When you lift up Jesus Christ—when you lift up his teachings, his example, his broad and accepting love that welcomed Samaritans and Syrophoenicians and Gaderenes and religious extremists and Jewish fundamentalists—when you make Jesus the center and focus of your life and teaching and of your church... all people are drawn to him.

Jesus is winsome. His message is timeless and transcendent. If you exalt Christ and allow him to teach you what it means to truly love your neighbor—all your neighbors, regardless of skin color or anything else—if this biblically faithful view of Jesus is what you proclaim and live out then I guarantee you, it will draw people from every race, ethnicity and background. You do not become diverse as a church by focusing on diversity. You become diverse by focusing on Christ who created this diverse world—who loves this diverse world, who died for this diverse world, whose spirit fills this diverse world—you lift Him up and all will and must be drawn to him.

Here's something else important to note in the story of Cornelius. It was a diversity of race; it was not a diversity of belief. It did matter what Cornelius believed. Otherwise, why did Peter have to come to his house? Cornelius was already a

devout man. He had raised a devout family. He was prayerful and generous and well-respected. In other words, as we might put it today, Cornelius was a good, religious, patriotic citizen. If that were enough, God could have just left it as it was, right? Why, then, did Peter need to tell him the rest of the story about Jesus? Because, what he believed mattered and unified them. What we believe matters and unifies us, too.

The greatest battle over diversity in the Church today is not about skin color; it is about ideology—an ideology that demotes Jesus and equalizes all religious teaching. It is the ideology expressed by this bumper sticker, “COEXIST”. I recently spoke to the new student body president at Whitworth. He is a godly young man who will advocate for our Christ-centered mission, but he told me that he faced opposition from liberal students because, as he described it, “He was not diverse enough.” Here’s the irony: he is Sri Lankan! Sri Lankan in Spokane... that sounds diverse to me. But it wasn’t his skin color they were talking about. This fringe group was concerned that he was too Christ-centered in his message and purpose. He wasn’t diverse enough ideologically for them.

I long for this church to be a place where anyone of any color, background, education, social status or political persuasion can come and worship and fellowship and serve