

Sermon Notes – May 21, 2020
“Called Out of Our Comfort Zone”
(Acts 11:1-18)

Ever had any of your long-held views/beliefs or traditions challenged? Have you ever felt God put someone or something in your pathway to get you to rethink or to change your attitude? Has God ever surprised you and called you out of your comfort zone?

Many years ago I served as a Minister of Education & Youth in a Baptist church in the western part of North Carolina. There was a family in the church whose only daughter was a student at Gardner-Webb University. One day she called her parents from college and told them she was coming home the following weekend and had something serious to share with them. The parents had no idea what it was – was she dropping out of college, etc.? Well, the weekend arrived and she told her parents she felt called into ministry; she didn’t know if that was to be a youth minister, a pastor, or a music minister. Now, keep in mind, her father was brought up in an ultra-conservative Baptist church and they didn’t believe women could serve as ordained ministers or deacons – even though Robert and his family were members in the church where I served as an ordained Minister of Education and that had two ordained women as deacons. (You might say her dad accepted the church’s decision, but he still personally had difficulty with the issue of women’s ordination.)

Robert told his daughter he needed some time to think and pray about this issue. Two weeks later Robert and his wife invited me to dinner and told me they wanted to “pick my brain” and the scriptures about something. I went to their home and shortly after lunch, Robert shared with me about his daughter’s calling into ministry and how he was not brought up or taught that was okay. He asked if I would share about my personal calling or choice to go in full-time ministry and being ordained, and what the Bible said. We spent two hours talking that afternoon. I had no idea exactly what Robert would say to his daughter next time they talked about her decision. He said that he was going to pray, read the Bible, and discuss it with others – and thanked me for coming. About 4

to 6 weeks later, Susan (the daughter) called and said, “Ms. Peggy, daddy has finally accepted that I must do whatever I feel led to and he supports me – even if he was still grasping it. He said, ‘if God has called and used Ms. Peggy like he has, then he can use you, too.’” Robert’s views about women in ministry grew after that experience with his daughter, and I am glad that God gave me the privilege to be on that journey with him and his family.

When I think about God using people or circumstances to refine our attitudes, I can’t help but remember the story of a single, young school teacher taking a vacation trip from the east coast to California in her dad’s RV. She got all the way to California and had a flat tire on the side of the road. She got out of the RV, looked at the flat tire, and remembered she had never changed a tire. She began to pray, “Lord, please send me someone to help.” She had no more than finished her prayer when a biker pulled up behind her RV. The guy on the motorcycle had a ponytail, tattoos, and was wearing a Hell’s Angels’ leather jacket. She thought, “what have I got myself into – is this guy going to hurt me?” But, the guy offered to change the tire. She didn’t have a spare tire. So, he told her he’d flag down a driver, go get a tire, and be back as soon as he could. Well, believe it or not, he flagged down a driver, went to the nearest tire store, bought her a tire, and came back and put it on the RV. He noticed the whole time he was working on her RV, she was fidgety, nervous, and uncomfortable – watching his every movement, but if he caught her staring, she quickly looked away. When he finished changing the tire, she offered to pay him. He quickly said, “No, my treat. Hope you have a better day. God bless you.” As he got on his bike, he looked back at her and gently said, “By the way, never judge a book by his cover. I’m a Christian biker and a former Hell’s Angel member on the way to speak to a group of bikers about Jesus.” And off he drove with her standing there – grateful, but surprised. She prayed for someone to help – it wasn’t what or who she expected – but God has a way of doing that, doesn’t he?

Today our scripture lesson is about two men (Peter and Cornelius) who were brought together by God in a unique or surprising way and how

Peter's view of Gentiles (outsiders) changed. Peter (a Jew) was visiting the home of a friend (Simon the Tanner) in Joppa by the sea. It was close to lunch, but the food wasn't going to be ready for awhile, so Peter decided to go up on the rooftop and take a nap. While asleep, he had a vision. In that vision he saw a large sheet powered down from heaven with all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles, and birds on it. The voice of an angel said, "Peter - kill and eat." Peter responded to the voice saying, "Nothing unclean or impure has ever touched my mouth." The angel of the Lord said, "Peter, do not call anything unclean or impure that God has made." Well, this same scenario appeared to Peter three times. After the third time of seeing the sheet with animals, he heard the voice say, "Peter, there are three men at the door looking for you. Do not hesitate to go with them. I have sent them for you." Peter gets up and goes downstairs and surely to goodness, there were three men at the door asking for him. Peter asked them what they wanted. They proceed to tell him about their boss, Cornelius, who had a vision and God told him to send them to get Peter to come back to his home in Caesarea to tell his family and friends about Jesus Christ. (Now, keep in mind, Cornelius is a *Gentile (non-Jew)*, a wealthy Roman commander in charge of 100 soldiers, and a God-fearing man - he believed in the God of the Jews.)

Peter invites Cornelius' Gentile servants to spend the night with him and Simon the Tanner. (*God must have already started work on Peter's attitude about those outsiders - those unclean Gentiles.*) The next day Peter goes with Cornelius' servants to Caesarea, taking with him six of his fellow Jewish followers. When Peter gets to Cornelius' home, he tells Cornelius, "you know that Jews do not associate, visit, or dine with Gentiles because of our Jewish customs and laws of uncleanness. **But, God has shown me that I am not to call anyone or anything unclean or impure made by God.** So, I didn't hesitate to come to your home, but what do you want?" Cornelius asked Peter to tell him and his family and friends about Jesus. As Peter began to proclaim the good news of God's love and forgiveness, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles as it did on Peter and others at Pentecost. Cornelius and his whole house of company that day professed faith in Jesus, were baptized, and Peter

shared the Lord's Supper with them. Peter stayed a few days with Cornelius to further instruct him of Jesus' teachings to his disciples.

When Peter and his six Jewish friends left Caesarea and went back to Jerusalem to his home church - *guess who was waiting on him?* A group of critics - "Hey Peter - what's this we heard about you eating and baptizing Gentiles (outsiders to Jews)?" Peter had some explaining to do. Why? Because the Jews believed they were God's chosen people and God's love and forgiveness was reserved exclusively for them. The Jews thought any Gentile (non-Jew) was an outsider, inferior, unworthy, and unclean. And if a Gentile professed faith in Jesus, the Jews thought that Gentile males must be circumcised, observe Sabbath, and all the other dietary restrictions and cleansing rituals that the Jews did.

Peter patiently explained to his critics about his vision from God and how God brought he and Cornelius together and how Cornelius and his Gentile friends responded by faith and repentance to Jesus Christ. **Peter helped them to understand that God changed his thinking - he once believed that the good news of Christ was reserved just for the Jews, but God helped him to see through his dream and his experience with Cornelius that God's love and salvation is for ALL people - Jews and Gentiles.**

(God surprised Peter and called him out of his comfort zone - through the vision God gave him and how he brought Peter (a Jew) and Cornelius (a Gentile) together. Peter experienced a **paradigm shift - a change in his thinking and his behavior.**)

Sometimes, we, too, need to experience a change in our thinking and our actions, and God may use a dream, a stranger, an experience or event to challenge our thinking and draw us out of our comfort zones. Sometimes our long-held views or attitudes about things or people need a touch of refining or transformation, especially our attitudes toward those we consider unworthy, inferior, or just outsiders. The scripture teaches us that the good news of Christ calls us all together as one family in God's

church. What is it the Apostle Paul said? - "There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave or free, for we are all one in Christ."

Pierce de Chardin said, "It is impossible to love Christ without loving others and it is impossible to love others without growing nearer to God." As we grow closer to Christ, God transforms our thinking, our attitudes, and our actions. **He reminds us that we are ALL created in God's image and we are to love and serve, even those different from us.**

In conclusion, I ask you - has God called you out of your comfort zone lately? Has God surprised you by some chance encounter with someone or something that has caused a shift in your attitude or actions? May the Holy Spirit continue to shift our thinking and actions to be more Christ-like. Amen.