

This Easter season we're reading through the book of Acts as a parish. In our section this week, we're in the midst of the 3 great turning points, the 3 great hinge points in the book of Acts.

On one side of these hinge points, the Christian church is a subset of Judaism. In other words, you have to convert to Judaism first before you could become a Christian.

On the other side of these hinge points, Christianity stands alone as an autonomous religion separate from Judaism.

Last week we talked about the first two hinge points.

In the 8th chapter of Acts, Deacon Philip baptized an Ethiopian convert. He is the first non-Jewish Christian in the history of Christianity.

Then, in the 9th chapter of Acts, we saw the conversion of Saul, the persecutor of Christianity. Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Afterwards, Saul became Paul. And later in Acts he will be the biggest single proponent of taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to non-Jews. And we will talk more about that next week.

But in the 10th and 11th chapters of Acts we have one more hinge point. And this pivotal moment surrounds Simon Peter, the leading apostle in the early church. We had the prelude as our first lesson this morning from the 9th chapter of Acts—Peter is in Joppa, modern day Tel Aviv. And there he raises Tabitha from death. As we have seen so far in Acts, the disciples are doing the same kinds of things Jesus did—preaching, teaching, healing, now even raising the dead.

But after this miracle, we arrive at the 3rd great turning point in Acts. This hinge point surrounds Simon Peter and a Roman Centurion named Cornelius.

Cornelius is part of the Italian Cohort, made up of 600 soldiers. As a Centurion, he commands 100 of them. He's stationed in Caesarea, the Roman capitol of Judea.

Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. Rome wanted to ensure their loyalty. So the Centurion's salary was 16 times the salary of the average soldier. That meant that Centurions were rather well off financially. But remember, when it comes to Cornelius the Centurion that he's rather well off because it's his job to be part of a military force that's occupying someone else's country. The Jews despised the occupying Romans. So, on the surface, from a Jewish standpoint, we'd expect Cornelius to be the bad guy.

But then we're told some other things about Cornelius. He is called a "devout man" who "feared God." This is something of a code. It means that Cornelius is a Gentile who has been flirting with Judaism. He's been dabbling on the fringes of Judaism. There are a number of Gentiles who were attracted to Jewish Monotheism. However, being circumcised was NOT attractive.

Cornelius is apparently one of these God fearers. He is attracted to the God of Israel. And Luke says that Cornelius gives alms generously and prays constantly. These are things that good Jews are called to do.

One afternoon, God sends Cornelius a vision. Cornelius is told to send some men 30 miles south to fetch Simon Peter in Joppa. Cornelius doesn't know why. But he complies. He sends his men to do as God commands. It seems the centurion knows how to follow orders from above.

The next day at noon, Acts says Simon Peter is praying on the roof of the house where he's staying. And God gives him a vision. Peter falls into a spiritual trance. He has a vision of a large linen picnic blanket being lowered from heaven. In the middle of the sheet are all sorts of animals, some which are kosher, and others which aren't. Peter hears a voice that says, "Kill and eat."¹ 'Have some bacon, shrimp and catfish.'

Peter objects—'I've never broken Jewish dietary laws.' Why should I start now?

For Jews, these laws were not incidental. These laws helped them draw a line around Judaism. That line defined who they were. If they didn't pay attention to that line, they were afraid they would be obliterated as a people. They'd be just like everyone else around them. This is not a matter of etiquette. This is a matter of survival as a people. So Peter objects 3 times. But God replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."²

While Peter is still confused by the vision, the men from Cornelius show up. Peter is told that these men were sent by God. They tell Peter about Cornelius and his vision.

And in response, Peter does something remarkable. He invites these men to stay with him. Good Jews did not eat like Gentiles. They certainly wouldn't eat with Gentiles. And they'd never have Gentiles as house guests. And yet, Peter invites these men to stay. Apparently, something is happening with Peter.

The next day, Peter and the men head back to Caesarea. When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls prostrate at his feet. It's quite a reversal. The military occupier is on the floor in front of one of the people whose land he's occupying. But Peter makes him stand up.

And then they compare notes. They share their visions with each other. Actually, Peter says something quite remarkable: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."³

Notice the shift here. God gave Peter a vision of clean and unclean foods. But Peter has interpreted it to mean clean or unclean people. Peter is no longer going to put himself in the

¹ Acts 10:13

² Acts 10:15

³ Acts 10:28

place of God. He's no longer going to be the one to judge others, whether they're profane or unclean. That's up to God, not him.

And he emphasizes that in a sermon which he launches into. We heard part of that sermon on Easter Sunday.

Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."⁴

Then Peter proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is why we read it every year on Easter Sunday. But the thing that is revolutionary in the context of the story of Cornelius is the assertion that anyone who believes in God is acceptable to him. And then to underscore that point, Peter says again, "All the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."⁵

What Peter is saying is that being part of the people of God is no longer a matter of being born into a certain ethnic, or cultural, or religious group. Instead, everyone who believes in Jesus is saved.

And then there's a remarkable moment. Acts says, "While Peter was still speaking..." In other words, Peter is just getting warmed up with his sermon. But Acts says, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word." God acts yet again by sending the gift of his Holy Spirit. This is sometimes labeled the Gentile Pentecost.

This is a hugely pivotal moment for the Christian church. God is showing publicly that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not for Jews alone, but it is for all who believe in Jesus. God underscores Peter's proclamation. God intervenes with a powerful sermon illustration. God truly does not show partiality. This is a revolutionary thought for the Jews. The Jewish Christians are astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to Cornelius and his household. Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The message is clear. The Holy Spirit is not under control of the church. It's up to the church to follow where the God's Spirit leads the way. The church doesn't baptize in order to force the Spirit to act. The Spirit acts in calling these people, and the church follows by baptizing.

So Cornelius and his household, presumably his parents, his children, and his slaves were all baptized in the name of Jesus. And then, Luke makes this crucial statement: The new believers invite Peter to stay with them for several days. Why? The assumption is that now that they're Christians, they need to learn more. Their baptism is not an end in itself. It's only the beginning.

⁴ Acts 10:34-35

⁵ Acts 10:43

This story turns out to be a conversion story. In fact it's a double conversion story. Cornelius and his household are converted. And Peter and the Christian Church are converted.

God is no respecter of persons. Our human categories of race and class and status and power and ethnicity and wealth mean nothing to him. All who believe are called into relationship with him.

And that call is not an end. It is a beginning. When anyone comes to the waters of baptism, it's a beginning. It's a double beginning. Those who are baptized are committing themselves to beginning a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We who witness their baptism are committing ourselves to welcoming them into the fellowship of faith. We don't choose God's followers. God chooses them. All of us are simply called to follow where the Spirit leads the way.

In the next chapter of Acts, Peter goes to Jerusalem and shares all that has happened with the rest of the leaders of the early church. There a little miffed that Peter has baptized these Romans, these pagans, these non-Jews. But Peter stands his ground and shares all that God did. And in the end, the Christian church agrees to accept non-Jews into the faith, into the body of Christ.

It is a pivotal moment, the third great hinge point in the middle of Acts.

First Phillip baptizes an Ethiopian. Then the persecutor Saul is converted. Then Peter himself baptizes Romans in response to God's call. And after these turning points, Christianity will never be the same.

After that, there is one more major story about Peter in Acts, a miraculous escape from prison. But after that, the focus of the book really shifts. Peter is still hugely important in the early church. But the rest of the book of Acts will focus mainly on that converted persecutor, Saul Paulus, the great St. Paul.

The door is now open in the church for non-Jews to become Christians. God, and St. Philip the Deacon, and St. Peter the Apostle have all paved the way. And now, St. Paul will pick up the baton. Paul will become the first great Christian missionary, taking the good news of Jesus Christ further and further and further into the heart of the Roman Empire.

We'll talk more about that part of the story next week.

For now, we can be thankful that the church expanded its reach to include non-Jews. That's good news for most of us. We have one member at St. Paul's who grew up Jewish. But I suspect most of the rest of us didn't. I know my ancestors during the time of Acts were pagan barbarians on the fringes of the Roman Empire, from places the Romans called Gaul, and Britannia, and Hibernia, and Germania.

But we are all now part of the people of God, we are all part of the Body of Christ, we are all part of the church because of these pivotal changes in Acts.

In the words of our lesson from Revelation, we can now be part that "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."⁶

And so to our Loving God who sits upon the throne, and to Christ the Lamb, be worship and praise and dominion and splendor forever and forevermore.

⁶ Rev 7:9