

Acts 10:34-48

May 6, '18

“INVISIBLE FENCES”

**THESE VERSES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS ARE FOUND
IN THE MIDDLE OF A SINGLE STORY.**

IT’S THE STORY OF PETER & CORNELIUS.

**THIS EVENT TAKES UP THE ENTIRE 10TH CHAPTER
OF ACTS & HALF OF THE 11TH.**

**THIS MEANS THAT, FOR LUKE – THE WRITER OF
ACTS – THIS IS A VITALLY IMPORTANT EVENT.**

**BASICALLY WHAT HAPPENS IS THAT CORNELIUS –
A HIGH-RANKING ROMAN CENTURION – HAS BECOME
VERY INTERESTED IN THE WAYS OF JUDAISM.**

**HE HAS BEEN CAPTIVATED BY THEIR WAY OF
SERVING GOD & HE’S INTERESTED IN LEARNING
MORE.**

ONE DAY, CORNELIUS HAS A VISION THAT HE'S TO SEND EMISSARIES TO A MAN NAMED PETER WHO IS STAYING IN JOPPA – ABOUT 30 MILES FROM WHERE HE IS, IN CAESAREA.

AT THE SAME TIME – IN JOPPA – PETER GOES TO THE ROOF OF THE HOME WHERE HE'S LODGING & PRAYS.

HE HAS A VISION HIMSELF – A VISION OF A SHEET COMING DOWN FROM HEAVEN, FILLED WITH ALL SORTS OF FOOD – FOOD THAT IS CONSIDERED UNCLEAN BY THE JEWS.

HE'S TOLD TO EAT THE FOOD, WHICH ABSOLUTELY HORRIFIES HIM.

HE WOULD NEVER DO SUCH A THING – EAT FOODS THAT ARE UNCLEAN.

**BUT PETER HEARS A VOICE PROCLAIM WORDS
THAT HAVE EARTH-SHATTERING SIGNIFICANCE –
“WHAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN, YOU MUST NOT CALL
UNCLEAN.”**

**WELL, BACK IN CAESAREA, CORNELIUS DECIDES
TO ACT ON HIS DREAM & HE SENDS 3 MEN TO JOPPA
TO BRING PETER BACK TO HIS HOME.**

**THE 3 MEN ARRIVE & PETER AGAIN HEARS A
VOICE TELLING HIM HE SHOULD ACCOMPANY THEM
TO CORNELIUS’ HOUSE.**

**SO HE DOES & WHEN HE ARRIVES, CORNELIUS
TELLS HIM ABOUT HIS DREAM.**

**HE TELLS HIM HE WAS INSTRUCTED TO LISTEN
TO WHAT PETER HAD TO SAY.**

**AND THAT LEADS US TO THE PART OF THE STORY
WE’VE READ THIS MORNING**

**THIS PASSAGE – THIS STORY – THIS WATERSHED
MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF OUR FAITH – MAY
TROUBLE YOU.**

IT MAY MAKE YOU FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE.

IT MAY MAKE YOU SQUIRM A BIT.

**I HOPE SO, BECAUSE IF IT DOES, THAT MEANS YOU
HAVE AT LEAST SOME UNDERSTANDING OF IT.**

**IF IT DOESN'T, THEN I'M AFRAID YOU'VE MISSED
THE POINT.**

**NOW, IF A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE IS
UNSETTLING, IT LOGICALLY FOLLOWS THAT A
SERMON ON THAT PASSAGE SHOULD BE AS WELL.**

I TRUST THAT'S FAIR WARNING.

**WHAT I HAVE TO SAY THIS MORNING MAY BE A
BIT UNSETTLING TO YOU.**

I HOPE SO BECAUSE IT'S RATHER UNSETTLING TO ME AS WELL.

YOU KNOW ONE OF THE THINGS MARK TWAIN SAID ABOUT THE SCRIPTURE – *“IT'S NOT THE PARTS OF THE BIBLE THAT I DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT BOTHER ME – IT'S THE PARTS THAT I DO UNDERSTAND.”*

AND THE GREAT WRITER G. K. CHESTERTON SAID, *“CHRISTIANITY HAS NOT BEEN TRIED AND FOUND WANTING. IT HAS BEEN FOUND DIFFICULT & NOT TRIED.”*

WELL, THIS PASSAGE IS CERTAINLY *DIFFICULT* & IT CHALLENGES US TO *TRY* – TRY TO LIVE ACCORDING TO ITS TEACHINGS.

IT'S A PASSAGE ABOUT EXPANDING OUR VISION IN FAITH.

**IT'S ABOUT LOOKING BEYOND WHAT WE'VE
ALWAYS THOUGHT TO BE TRUE.**

**SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I CONCLUDED A SERMON
ABOUT ANOTHER PART OF THE CORNELIUS STORY
WITH THESE WORDS – *“MAYBE WE'VE BEEN LOOKING
FOR GOD TO DO GREAT THINGS IN OUR MIDST WHEN
GOD IS ALREADY DOING GREAT THINGS OVER AT
CORNELIUS' HOUSE!”***

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SUGGEST THAT WHILE
WE WANT GOD TO DO GREAT THINGS IN OUR MIDST,
THE ALMIGHTY IS ALREADY DOING GREAT THINGS
SOMEWHERE ELSE?**

WHERE?

WHERE IS GOD DOING GREAT THINGS?

AND WHO – IN OUR DAY – IS CORNELIUS?

**THERE'S A GREAT STORY OF DR. RALPH
SOCKMAN WHO WAS THE RENOWNED PASTOR OF
CHRIST METHODIST CHURCH IN NEW YORK CITY.**

**DR. SOCKMAN WAS COMING HOME FROM A
SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT AND ARRIVED ON THE
TRAIN INTO PENN STATION.**

**HE GOT A CAB & SAID TO THE DRIVER, "*TAKE ME
TO CHRIST CHURCH, PLEASE.*"**

**AS THE CAB DRIVER WAS WEAVING HIS WAY
THROUGH NEW YORK CITY, DR. SOCKMAN OPENED
HIS BRIEFCASE AND WAS LOOKING OVER A FEW
THINGS.**

**AFTER A LONG DRIVE, THE TAXI DRIVER PULLED
UP IN FRONT OF ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL.**

DR. SOCKMAN WAS HORRIFIED!

HE SAID, "*THIS ISN'T CHRIST CHURCH!*"

**THE TAXI DRIVER LOOKED BACK AT HIM & SAID,
“LISTEN, BUDDY. IF HE AIN’T HERE, HE AIN’T IN
TOWN!”**

**I’M AFRAID A LOT OF US HAVE THE “IF HE AIN’T
HERE, HE AIN’T IN TOWN” MENTALITY.**

**I MUST CONFESS THAT I AM PERHAPS MORE
GUILTY OF THIS THAN ANYONE HERE TODAY.**

**I’M A PRESBYTERIAN & I MUST CONFESS THAT I
WOULD HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF DIFFICULTY BEING
PART OF ANY OTHER CHURCH.**

**EVEN IF I WEREN’T A MINISTER OR EVEN IF I
WEREN’T SERVING A CHURCH, I THINK I WOULD FIND
IT EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO BE A REGULAR
WORSHIPPER & PARTICIPANT IN A CHURCH THAT
WASN’T PRESBYTERIAN.**

**SO DON'T THINK I'M TRYING TO TAKE THE SPECK
OUT OF *YOUR* EYE WHEN I'VE GOT THIS ENORMOUS
LOG IN MY OWN.**

**FOR MOST OF YOU, I DOUBT YOU HAVE AS MUCH
DIFFICULTY AS I DO IN THINKING BEYOND OUR
LITTLE CORNER OF CHRISTIANITY.**

YES, THIS PASSAGE MAKES ME SQUIRM!

**DREW & MARIE – OUR SON & DAUGHTER-IN-LAW –
HAVE AN INVISIBLE FENCE IN THEIR YARD FOR THEIR
DOGS.**

**OVER THE YEARS, IT'S BEEN FUN TO WATCH
TRUCKER & RANSOM RACE AROUND AS FAST THEY
CAN ALL OVER THEIR OWN LAWN, BUT NEVER LEAVE
THE PROPERTY.**

THE INVISIBLE FENCE KEEPS THEM INSIDE.

WE ALL HAVE AN INVISIBLE FENCE, DON'T WE?

**WE HAVE AN INVISIBLE FENCE THAT KEEPS US IN
OUR OWN LITTLE WORLD WHILE AT THE SAME TIME,
KEEPING CERTAIN PEOPLE OUT.**

**PETER HAD ONE AND IT KEPT HIM FROM
VENTURING OUTSIDE OF HIS TINY, NARROW
NEIGHBORHOOD OF FAITH.**

**WHERE'S YOUR INVISIBLE FENCE & WHO DOES IT
PREVENT YOU FROM HAVING A RELATIONSHIP WITH?**

**IS IT SOMEONE OF ANOTHER RACE OR
ETHNICITY?**

**IS IT SOMEONE OF A DIFFERENT SOCIAL
STANDING?**

**FOR SOME OF YOU, IT WOULD BE THOSE WHO ARE
HOMELESS.**

STILL OTHERS WOULD FIND IT UNCOMFORTABLE TO HAVE PEOPLE HERE WHO AREN'T WEARING – AS THEY SAY – “*THEIR SUNDAY BEST.*”

AND SOMEONE WHOSE SEXUAL ORIENTATION ISN'T THE SAME AS YOURS WOULD PERHAPS MAKE YOU VERY UNCOMFORTABLE.

WE LIVE IN A POLARIZED SOCIETY – PERHAPS AS POLARIZED AS ANY OF US CAN EVER REMEMBER.

JESUS CALLS US TO CLIMB OVER OUR INVISIBLE FENCES THAT WALL US OFF FROM THOSE WE LABEL AS “OTHERS” –

- THAT *OTHER* POLITICAL PARTY, THAT *OTHER* DENOMINATION, THAT *OTHER* FAITH TRADITION, THAT *OTHER* ETHNICITY, THAT *OTHER* SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS, THAT *OTHER* RACE, THAT *OTHER* SEXUAL PREFERENCE.

**WHEN YOU THINK OF THOSE *OTHER* PEOPLE –
THOSE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF YOUR INVISIBLE
FENCE, YOU’D RATHER THEY NOT SIT NEXT TO YOU,
LET ALONE INVITE YOU OVER FOR SUNDAY DINNER!**

**BUT REMEMBER – THIS IS WHAT THE HOLY SPIRIT
HAS CHALLENGED PETER TO DO!**

**LOOK AT THAT FINAL VERSE - “*THEY ASKED HIM
TO REMAIN FOR SOME DAYS.*”**

AND HE DID!

**HE ACTUALLY STAYED WITH CORNELIUS IN HIS
HOME!**

THIS IS HUGE!

**THIS IS A MONUMENTAL SHIFT IN EVERYTHING
PETER HAS ALWAYS BELIEVED.**

**HE’S BEING CHALLENGED TO DISARM & TEAR
DOWN HIS INVISIBLE FENCE.**

**AS IF THAT WEREN'T ENOUGH, NOTICE
SOMETHING ELSE THAT HAPPENS HERE THAT'S
VITALLY IMPORTANT.**

**WHEN THOSE 3 GUYS CAME TO SEE PETER, HE
DIDN'T SEND THEM BACK TO CORNELIUS WITH AN
INVITATION TO COME TO CHURCH.**

**HE WENT TO CORNELIUS HIMSELF TO DISCOVER
WHAT IT WAS THAT GOD WAS DOING IN THIS ROMAN
CENTURION'S LIFE.**

**WHAT MIGHT IT MEAN FOR US TO DO THAT – TO
QUIT BEING SO CAUGHT UP IN CHURCH & FAITH &
CHRISTIANITY & THEOLOGY HAVING TO BE A
CERTAIN WAY & STEP OUTSIDE OUR NARROW VIEWS
& DO AWAY WITH OUR INVISIBLE FENCE?**

**DON'T GET ME WRONG – WE CERTAINLY SHOULD
BE MORE ACTIVE & INTENTIONAL ABOUT INVITING
PEOPLE TO JOIN US *HERE*.**

**WE SHOULD ALSO BE WILLING TO WARMLY,
GENUINELY, SINCERELY WELCOME ANYONE WHO
STEPS INSIDE OUR DOORS.**

**BUT HOW MIGHT WE LEAVE THE COMFORT OF
OUR CHURCH BUILDING & STEP INTO THE WORLD TO
SEE HOW GOD IS ALREADY AT WORK IN THE LIFE OF
SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T KNOW THE FIRST THING
ABOUT JESUS CHRIST & THE CHRISTIAN FAITH?**

THAT'S WHAT PETER IS CALLED TO DO!

YOU SEE?

**I TOLD YOU THIS PASSAGE WOULD MAKE YOU
FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE IF YOU REALLY
UNDERSTOOD WHAT'S BEING SAID HERE.**

**LET ME GO A STEP FURTHER – OR, PERHAPS - IN
THE MINDS OF SOME - A STEP IN THE OPPOSITE
DIRECTION.**

**THERE ARE THOSE FOR WHOM THIS PASSAGE IS
CONFIRMATION OF THE “*ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE
SAME PLACE*” PHILOSOPHY.**

**THERE ARE THOSE WHO WOULD SAY – “*THIS
STORY OF PETER & CORNELIUS SHOULD LEAD US TO
CONCLUDE THAT IT DOESN’T REALLY MATTER WHAT
YOU BELIEVE – AS LONG AS YOU BELIEVE IN
SOMETHING.***

***YOU CAN BE A CHRISTIAN, A MUSLIM, A JEW, A
HINDU, A BUDDHIST, A MORMON, A JEHOVAH’S
WITNESS.***

***IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER – JUST BELIEVE IN
GOD BECAUSE ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE SAME PLACE &
THIS IS WHAT PETER IS BEING TOLD IN THIS PASSAGE.***

***THIS IS HOW HIS HORIZONS ARE BEING EXPANDED
– THIS IS HOW THE BARRIERS ARE BEING TORN DOWN &
THE DOORS OPEN TO FULL ACCEPTANCE OF ANYONE
WITH ANY BELIEF.”***

**THAT KIND OF THINKING IS A COMPLETE
MISUNDERSTANDING OF THIS PASSAGE.**

**IT TOTALLY IGNORES THE MESSAGE THAT PETER
PROCLAIMS TO CORNELIUS & HIS HOUSEHOLD.**

LOOK AT THE SERMON HE PREACHES.

**IT'S A SERMON THAT IS CENTERED COMPLETELY
ON JESUS CHRIST.**

**IT ISN'T A MESSAGE ABOUT SOME GENERAL
BELIEF IN GOD.**

**IT'S A MESSAGE THAT SPECIFICALLY FOCUSES ON
JESUS CHRIST.**

**IT IS IN HIM & BY HIM & THROUGH HIM THAT
ACCESS TO GOD IS FOUND.**

***“HE IS LORD OF ALL,”* PETER SAYS.**

**PETER LOOKS AT THE WORLD OVER THE TOP OF
HIS METAPHORICAL INVISIBLE FENCE AND HE SEES
JESUS STANDING IN THE CENTER OF THAT WORLD.**

**I HAVE SAID BEFORE & I WILL SAY AGAIN THAT
THE GREATEST THREAT TO OUR FAITH IN THIS DAY &
AGE IS WHEN WE START TO WAVER IN OUR BELIEF
THAT JESUS *“IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH & THE LIFE &
THAT NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER BUT THROUGH
HIM.”***

**BUT WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THAT,
PARADOXICALLY, MAINTAINING THAT BELIEF**

**DOESN'T NARROW OUR VISION – IT EXPONENTIALLY
EXPANDS IT!**

**THIS WAS PRECISELY THE REASON CORNELIUS
SENT FOR PETER IN THE FIRST PLACE!**

**HE WAS TIRED OF THE MYRIAD OF GODS HE SAW
ALL AROUND HIM.**

**HE WAS TIRED OF A GENERIC & CASUAL FAITH
THAT WAS FULL OF HALF-TRUTHS.**

**HE WANTED A SPECIFIC & ABIDING FAITH THAT
WAS THE ABSOLUTE & ULTIMATE TRUTH.**

THAT'S WHAT PETER GAVE HIM.

**AND NOTICE WHAT HAPPENED TO CORNELIUS &
ALL THOSE WHO GATHERED IN HIS HOME WHEN
THEY HEARD WHAT PETER HAD TO SAY.**

**THEY BECAME OVERWHELMED WITH THE STORY
& WERE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.**

**THAT'S WHAT THE STORY OF JESUS CHRIST
SHOULD DO TO ALL OF US.**

**IT'S A STORY THAT PUTS ALL THE OTHER
STORIES OF LIFE INTO PERSPECTIVE BECAUSE IT
ENABLES US TO SEE THE WORLD BEYOND OUR
INVISIBLE FENCE – A WORLD THAT HAS JESUS CHRIST
STANDING AT THE CENTER OF IT. AMEN.**

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