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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