

MISSION BELLS: 3. LISTEN

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Acts 10 Selected

I want you to surprise the world. I want you to live such lives that people sit up and take notice. I want you to change the world through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what I want you to do. And how are you to do this? By leading Questionable Lives.

When I was in college, I had a classmate who was a business major who let it be known to all that his goal in life was to amass one million dollars by the time he reached thirty. We weren't friends but even I knew of his goal. People talked about it. I have no idea if he succeeded. But even in college, his actions were clear. He would do something, and you might ask why, but the answer was always there—to make money. His actions raised the question but also provided the answer. That is questionable living.

Questionable Living is living in such a way that causes people to take notice and question why you are doing what you do. But the act of Questionable Living not only poses the question, but points to the answer as well. And the answer for us, as Christians, must be Jesus Christ. We are to live our lives in such a way that people look at us and ask "why" but also realize, "Oh, I get it. Because of Jesus."

But we also have to surprise them. You don't question why a firefighter rushes to a burning building; you don't question why a plumber clears a drain. It's what they do. For us, as Christians, it is no surprise when we go to worship on Sundays. People expect us to do that. It is a surprise when we pack our bags and head to a foreign land in order to provide medical care to the destitute and suffering, or provide shelter for the unhoused in the winter.

But we can also surprise the world when we do little things like Bless and Eat—the two Missional Habits I introduced over the past two weeks. Today, we are going to look at a third Missional Habit—Listening—and see how it plays out in scripture.

Our reading for today is a wonderful and peculiar story from the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke and tells of the growth and development of the Jesus movement known as the church.

This story focuses on two men—Cornelius and Peter—and the surprising things that happen when they choose to listen.

The story starts off in the city of Caesarea Maritima. This was a Roman port near Jerusalem constructed by Herod and named for Caesar Augustus. As we read in the Book of Acts, in Caesarea there lived a Roman centurion named Cornelius. As

a centurion, he would have commanded one hundred Roman soldiers. Although he likely was from Italy, Cornelius worships Yahweh, the God of Israel. He is described as being *a devout man who along with those in his household feared God. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.*

Despite worshipping God, he was not a Jew. Jews didn't have a ready mechanism for accepting converts. Being a Jew normally meant being a descendant of one of the twelve tribes, adhering to the dietary laws, and, if a male, being circumcised. Although Cornelius was drawn to and worshiped the God of the Jews, he himself was not Jewish. He was a Gentile. But it would seem that after living in Judea for many years, he had developed an affinity for the Jewish faith. He had also developed a reputation for his attendance at the synagogue and for his generous charitable giving.

One afternoon, while in prayer, Cornelius has a vision in which an angel tells him to send for a man named Peter who is presently a short distance away in the city of Joppa. Cornelius dispatches three of his men to fetch Peter.

This brings us to the second location of this story—Joppa. Joppa was a coastal city about 38 miles south of Caesarea. The apostle, Simon Peter, was staying in Joppa.

So, the next day, while Cornelius' men are traveling toward Joppa, Peter is waiting for his lunch to be prepared. While he waits, he goes up onto the roof to pray. While praying, he has a vision—a rather odd vision.

In his vision Peter observes a massive cloth lowered from heaven by its four corners. And contained in this cloth are all manner of living creatures—all of them animals that Jews regarded as unclean—prohibited by Jewish dietary laws.

[Scholars tell us that this is the first recorded example of “pigs in a blanket.” (I'm just kidding.)]

A voice says, *Get up, Peter; kill and eat.* But Peter refuses because he knows it is sinful to consume these creatures. Maybe it is a test? Peter says, *By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.* After all, he is observant of his faith. The voice replies, *What God has made clean, you must not call profane.* Then the cloth is retracted into heaven.

While Peter is trying to sort out what has just happened in this vision, Cornelius' men arrive and the Holy Spirit commands Peter to go with them. Peter and some other believers from Joppa follow the men back to Caesarea where they are welcomed warmly by Cornelius. Cornelius invites his friends and relatives to come and meet Peter.

Once everyone is present, Peter points out that it goes against his faith for a Jew to associate with Gentiles in this manner. Normally, he would not have accepted Cornelius' invitation. But he explains that God has recently shown him otherwise. No longer is he to consider any person as being unworthy or unclean. This would include the Gentiles, even an officer in the Roman army.

There in Cornelius' house, surrounded by these non-Jews, Peter begins to preach. He starts off by saying, *I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.*

This statement may not sound like much to us, but it represents a seismic shift in the attitude of the early church toward Gentiles. It charts a new course for the followers of Christ.

The first followers of Jesus were Jews and they regarded Jesus as Israel's savior. They felt that accepting non-Jews into the fold would dilute their heritage. But the vision Peter had of the great cloth filled with unclean animals changed his perspective. If God declares something to be clean, then who is Peter (or anyone) to say otherwise? The Gentiles must be welcomed.

And that is how Peter begins his address to Cornelius' household by saying, *God shows no partiality. I get it now.*¹

This story is about two men in different locales engaging independently in prayer, and the Holy Spirit draws them together and changes the trajectory of the Jesus movement.

This story is about listening—two powerful men who were willing to listen—first to God and then to one another.

Today is the third Sunday of the Season of Lent and we continue this sermon series Mission BELLS. The "Mission" part tells us what we are supposed to do. And the BELLS part describes how we can do it. BELLS is an acronym for five Missional Habits: Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn, and Sent.

Already, I have introduced you to Bless and Eat, urging you to go out into the community in a spirit of evangelism. I asked you to Bless three people and I asked you to Eat with three people. And I want you to continue doing these things until they become habit or second nature.

¹ The word translated *understand* literally means "to grab hold of." We might read it as Peter saying, "I get it; It get it that God shows no partiality." Furthermore, the tense of the verb implies a process. What Peter is really saying is, "I am in the process of getting it; I am in the process of understanding." This change in Peter's outlook is not instantaneous, but rather something Peter will work through. It will take time.

As Michael Frost tells us in his book, “Surprise the World,” not all of us are born to be evangelists. Yes, we want to share our faith, but how do we do this if we are not skilled in evangelism. Most of us are intimidated by Jesus’ command to: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.* (Matthew 28:18-20).

Because to be honest, very few of us are gifted evangelists. But that is okay, because God gives us other gifts. We know this from Paul’s Letter to the Church in Rome where he writes: *We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness* (Romans 12:6-8).

And that is what, in this Season of Lent, I am challenging you to do—to exercise your spiritual gifts. If you are an evangelist, go for it. But if you are not (and few of us are), then your gifts lie elsewhere. There are many things you can do—prophecy, ministry, teach, exhort, give, lead, show compassion. All these are ways to share the faith and bring the gospel to the world. That is what we are doing in this time of Lent—using our gifts and developing Missional Habits and practicing the gospel.

Cornelius, the Roman centurion, displayed two Missional Habits—praying and giving. As we read, *he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.* That was his habit. That is who he was.

So, so far, I’ve asked that you Bless people and to Eat with people—to show compassion and hospitality.

The third Missional Habit is Listen. And this one is different than the first two. You are not interacting with other people. You are listening—listening to God. In other words, you are to engage in prayer.

Now, I’m not going to give you a lesson in prayer. You know what it is. It is engaging with God in conversation. And conversation is the key. It is not just a one-sided conversation of us blathering on and on. Proper prayer requires us to listen. And listening does amazing things. Too much of our prayer is just us asking. And that is okay. But we also need to listen.

At the Transfiguration, God intervenes and tells Peter, *This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him.* To hear the gospel is to listen. When Jesus visited his friends Mary and Martha, Martha was too distracted with the cooking to actually listen. Her sister, Mary, *sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.* Jesus told Martha that Mary chose *the better part* (Luke 10:38-42).

When we listen, we’ll get the answers to questions we haven’t even asked. In this story with Cornelius and Peter, both were simply praying, not asking.

Cornelius was instructed to send for Peter. Peter was instructed to accept Gentiles into the church. Their listening was an act of evangelism. It also changed the church.

We may think that the early church had a plan, maybe a five-year plan with an executive summary and goals and objectives all in a nice binder. We may think that the early apostles had a detailed roadmap and knew what they were doing. But they didn't. Time after time, we see the church being directed—and re-directed—by prayer.

The Apostle Paul was traveling through the region of Galatia when he received a vision of a man calling him to Greece. He immediately sailed for Macedonia to the city of Philippi and founded a church there. It wasn't his plan. But he listened (Acts 16:6-10).

If there is one thing I could say about this congregation, it would be that we need to listen more. Our convictions of what this church must be prevent us from seeing what it could be.

Many of us have read the book "Sailboat Church" by Joan Gray. The idea of that book is that most of our churches are like rowboats, with the church members pulling hard to get where we want to go. Instead, we should be like sailboats guided by the winds of the Holy Spirit. Sailing is still hard; it requires the sailors to work together. But working together they do amazing things.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he instructed his followers to go back to Jerusalem and wait. And they did. And then, one day, the Holy Spirit came to them and a crowd gathered, and thousands were baptized. Those early followers raised their sails and put themselves into God's hands. They went where the spirit led them. They changed the world because they chose to Listen.

So, this week, I want you to adopt the Missional Habit of Listening. Set aside 15 or 20 minutes away from distractions and commit to prayer. You can talk but you must also listen. Learning to pray is tough. It is a skill that takes practice. If the quiet scares you, then take a passage from scripture. Psalm 23 is a great place to start. *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want....* Read the words of the psalm over and over. You may not change the world this week, but develop a habit of listening so that when the Spirit speaks you will be ready—ready to surprise the world.