

When Strangers Become Friends
Dr. Seuss Book: What Was I Scared Of?
August 27, 2017
Scripture Acts 10:1-8

In Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ²He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." ⁴He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

The first time I read "What Was I Scared Of?", and pondered its preachability, I thought of Peter and Cornelius. The occasion of their meeting is quite an adventure and their story is told in the 10th Chapter of Acts. To give a little background, the Book of Acts chronicles the development of the church as the disciples tried to carry on the ministry of Jesus. Peter was the head of the Jerusalem church. It might be helpful to remember that early on, people who followed Jesus considered themselves to be Jews who believed Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. This means they followed Jewish law.

Cornelius was not Jewish, he was not a convert, he was a Roman centurion that loved God. He was generous and prayed constantly. One afternoon, Cornelius was visited by an angel and Cornelius was terrified. The angel called him by name. There was no mistaking this message was for him. With trembling voice, he asked, "What is it, Lord?" He was instructed by the angel to send men to Joppa to get Peter and bring him to Cornelius. The angel even gave him Peter's address.

About noon the next day, we learn that Cornelius' men are on their way. Meanwhile, Peter is hungry and while he is waiting for lunch to be prepared he has a dream about food. It says he fell into a trance. In this vision, he saw this thing like a sheet coming down from heaven. It was filled with all kinds of four-footed creatures, and reptiles, and birds. At first you think, "Wow, Peter is really hungry!" but when a voice tells Peter to kill and eat, Peter is horrified. You see the sheet was filled with creatures that Jewish people can't eat according to the law and Peter had never eaten anything like what was on that sheet. The voice doesn't seem to care about Peter's concerns. Peter is told, "What God has made clean you must not call profane." We know from the Gospels that it sometimes took Peter a little while to catch on – so he had to go through this little exchange with the voice two more times before the vision/dream, whatever it was, ended.

Peter stood there scratching his head, checking his drink, wondering if what just happened really happened. Suddenly, the voice, now identified as the Spirit, tells Peter that some men are going to show up and want him to travel with them. "Go without hesitation," says the Spirit. The next day they travel to the house of Cornelius where Cornelius has gathered all his relatives and friends to see Peter. When Cornelius sees Peter he falls at Peter's feet. Peter immediately tells him to get up. "I am only a mortal," said Peter.

Peter looks around and sees all the people gathered around him – all eyes on him. This is a much different crowd from Peter's usual audience. These people are Gentiles. These people are unclean.

That is when things start to click for Peter. I wonder if he looked to heaven and said, “Oh, now I get it! Now I see what you are doing!”

“You know,” speaks Peter, “that this isn’t right, don’t you? You know that it is against Jewish law for me to be here. Jews can’t associate with or visit Gentiles...at least that’s the way it has always been, till now...God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. That’s why I came. Now why did you send for me?”

Cornelius told his story about the angel telling him to send for Peter. “We are all here to listen to what you have to say.” So, Peter began to preach and he begins with his new-found revelation, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality...” and he went on to tell them about Jesus. By the end of his sermon the Holy Spirit was poured out on that gathering of Gentiles. After that, they lined up to be baptized and asked him to hang out for a few days.

What did Peter have to be scared of? It was against a law Peter honored his entire life until that moment. He was the only one who got the memo from God and he could be mistaken. Everyone would find out and it would shake the church. People would question his leadership, stop contributing, maybe even leave the church. Peter’s meeting with Cornelius and his sudden declaration that God shows no partiality meant a seismic shift for Christianity. So, you see, there were plenty of reasons to be afraid.

In the first century, the issue was the divide between Jews and Gentiles. Peter crossed it. In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul (whose ministry was dedicated to Gentiles) named a few other divides when he made the bold declaration, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

Much has changed since Peter and Paul had their revelations about God’s beloved community and the story of God’s inclusion has continued to evolve for most Christians. It is easy to forget there used to be a huge divide between Catholics and Protestants. My hope is that future generations will look back to a time when they can say there used to be a divide among those who welcomed all to the table and those who did not. It is amazing to watch well-known Christian leaders have a Peter/Cornelius moment and change their mind about same-sex marriage.

A few years ago, Rick Warren, pastor of one of the largest churches in the US, maybe the world, did an interview with Piers Morgan on CNN. They had the following exchange:¹

“But you and I know the Bible is, in many places, a flawed document,” Morgan continued. “My point to you about gay rights for example – it’s time for an amendment to the Bible.”

“You should compile a new Bible,” Morgan declared.

“I do not believe the Bible is flawed,” Warren said. “And I willingly admit, willingly admit that I base my worldview on the Bible, which I believe is true, and truth. My definition of truth is if it’s new, it’s not true. If it was true 1,000 years ago, it’ll be true 1,000 years from today.”

If you apply that logic to our story today, Peter violated a well-established truth. Peter violated a law that had been in place for centuries. In a matter of days Peter flip-flopped on

¹ http://ontopmag.com/article/13955/Piers_Morgan_To_Rick_Warren_Amend_The_Bible_To_Allow_Gay_Marriage

his stance on Gentiles. Why? Because God helped him to see a greater truth. God helped Peter to see that God's embrace is deep and wide and not bound by our prejudice or our fears. It is a message God continues to speak today. We keep building walls of fear and God keeps knocking out doorways of love.

In our Dr. Seuss story for today, the main character and the pale green pants, finally collide in a snide field. It is a dark and gloomy night and he has to pick a peck of snide in a snide field almost nine miles wide. I'm no literary genius but it seems a little obvious that the word snide is not a random choice for the story. We've all heard and probably made our share of snide remarks...snide means derogatory or mocking in an indirect way. Snide is: disparaging, derogatory, deprecating, denigrating, insulting, contemptuous, dismissive – which is exactly how we treat people who are a mystery to us. It's only when we reach through the snide that we discover the other is our brother (and sister) (and friend.)

God shows no partiality, but we do...we pick pecks of snide. The New Interpreter's Bible offers this reflection on our passage today... "The Biblical idea that God has chosen a particular people as object of special regard cultivates the dangerous suspicion that God did not therefore choose others. Those believers who think themselves among God's elect are often inclined on this theological basis to think that God has not chosen anyone else who disagrees with their beliefs or customs. We pin labels on our disagreeable opponents to disenfranchise them: they are "liberal" or "conservative" or "homosexual" or "Jewish" or "Lutheran" or "female" or "laity" or "black" or "divorced." Yet, what has become crystal-clear to Peter is that to do so is not the prerogative of pious Israel or anyone else: It is God alone that judges the living and the dead (10:42). One of the most surprising features of Acts is the diversity of people God calls to be included among God's people – all of whom are symbolized by uncircumcised Cornelius."

There is an old wisdom story that goes like this:

The master asked his disciples: "how do we know when the night is over and the day has arrived?"

And the disciples pondered the master's question.

One answered: "Master night is over and day arrives, when you can see a house in the distance and determine if that's your house or the house of your neighbor."

Another disciple responded: "Night is over and day arrives when you can see an animal in the field and determine if it belongs to you or to your neighbor."

A third disciple offered: "Night is over and day has arrived when you can see a flower in the garden and distinguish its color."

"No, no, no," thundered the master. "Why must you see only in separations, only in distinctions, only in disjunctions. No. Night is over and day arrives when you look into the face of the person beside you and you can see that she is your sister, he is your brother, that you belong to each other, that you are one. Then, and only then, will you know that night has ended and day has arrived."

I'm not naïve. I know there are real threats and there are some strangers we cannot immediately befriend. But I also know that we all have our own fields of snipe, and we have our names and our reasons for thinking **that** person, or **those** people, are to be feared and avoided at all costs. But we'll never know for sure until we reach through the snipe and actually meet. We might learn that they are just as scared as we are – and just as judgmental as we are. When we get through all the snipe, we might just discover a friend. We might discover that a new day has begun.