



Ravensworth

BAPTIST CHURCH

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Acts 10

I've Been Meaning to Ask...Where Do We Go From Here?

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I'm enrolled in my final course of seminary to complete my Master of Divinity after taking a three-year pause. I felt overwhelmed with major life transitions that happened in three years, all of which are wonderful. I got married, I became a mother twice, I moved to Washington, DC. But I did not have family close by to help which meant Jose and I were adjusting to living in a new state, new culture, new job, and trying to raise children all by ourselves. It was an all-consuming task. Which meant that I didn't have spiritual, physical, or mental energy for theological engagement. But putting a three-year pause didn't mean I forgot the call of God on my life. So now I'm picking up from where I left off.

With fresh optics to view Scripture and God. I'm in a slightly different season of life where my littles are no longer infants, and I'm no longer struggling to keep my head above water. I've learned to adjust to the evolving demands of motherhood. I now have a rhythm that feels good and gives more time for theological reflection. This week I dusted off my notes and books from seminary and am falling in love again with Scripture.

My professor from seminary, Dr. Arterbury says the Books of Luke and Acts highlight journey imagery. They focus on discipleship as a journey. He says that 40% of the gospel of Luke takes place while the disciples are on a journey. Luke and Acts are framed this way because the great epics of Greek and Roman history, such as The Illiad, are all about journeys. The characters of these stories are formed during the journey, and so are Jesus' disciples. But a major component of journeying are new beginnings. Luke and Acts also highlight stories about beginnings—the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church, the initiation of a new mission, the beginning of one's life after accepting Christ's love. We can all relate to experiencing new beginnings.

The first time I visited Ravensworth Baptist Church I felt a new beginning when Dot Murphy embraced me with kindness. She gave our family a DVD called Little Miss Sunshine and encouraged us to watch it together. It was the way she smiled, even with a mask, the way she made my boys feel acknowledged, and the sound of her voice, that made me think I found a church home like the one I left behind. I am told that Dot Murphy had a way of giving pieces of herself to others. As we watched the movie together my family and I held a piece of her closely. I'm thankful we felt her love before she passed away the following week. I never got to tell her thank-you. And that Little Miss Sunshine is a funny movie! But her love continues. And reminds me that beginnings are not destinations. The end of one person's journey, can be the beginning of another. Each of us enters and exits at different places but we are on the journey together, moving forward in faith.

As we enter our final week of the summer series, I've Been Meaning to Ask, we hold closely the question, "Where do we go from here?" Last week we first asked this question and held closely two

people whose journeys merged. The end of Ruth's husband's journey was the beginning of a new story for Ruth and Naomi. They carried grief and loss into an unknown future. Yet instead of trying to recreate the past, they allowed God to work in their present. And isn't that the beauty of asking the question, "Where do we go from here?" We can bring our pain into this question, our confusion. We bear witness to each other's grief as we ask this question. And in doing so, we too are formed. The mystery of asking this question, is that God's creative power of Holy Spirit meets us in ways we least expect. In our text today we find a cast of characters whose journeys merge in a surprising way.

The first layer of surprise is from Peter, a devout Jew raised to follow spiritual and ritualistic laws passed down from generations. He is met with a vision from God that leaves him perplexed. For generations, Hebraic Law set apart the people of God.

These rules established holiness and sacred rhythms around work, worship and daily living. I can only imagine that Peter, being a religious rule follower, may have struggled a bit with this vision. He is asked to eat from a sheet of ritualistically unclean animals. And further, is given the divine message that what God has made clean, you must not call profane. But he resists. Certainly not Lord! I have not eaten anything unclean. Does Peter notice the details of this vision? The four corners of the sheet representing the four corners of the world, a global mission. God is revealing a new direction for God's people. God is doing a new thing! And yet Peter is resisting. But should Peter be surprised? Wasn't this the God he already knew through Christ Jesus whose love was radical? Jesus was known to take rules and redefine what it meant to embody them. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he dined with tax collectors and sex workers. Jesus instructed Peter to walk on water and meet him in the middle of a lake, at night! Jesus is anything but conventional. And Peter bore first-hand witness to

Jesus's ministry of radical love and inclusion. Jesus drew the circle wide. And in doing so, he turned all religious and political systems upside down. Dr. Arterbury, says the gospels and subsequently the Book of Acts highlight an upside-down theology. Jesus' disciples have an idea about the Kingdom of God and how it should be, and Jesus comes and turns their ideas upside down. Jesus is constantly surprising his followers with the truth of how God's kingdom really is.

The second layer of surprise comes from Cornelius. Cornelius surprises me! Cornelius, a Roman centurion, goes against all my preconceived notions about who a Roman centurion should be. Cornelius would have held significant military power and most likely been a conduit of oppression. As a Roman centurion, his allegiance to Empire would lead to nationalistic fervor. But this is not so. We learn that his devotion to God centers his life. He has access to resources and power, yet chooses to live with integrity and generosity. He shares resources with the most vulnerable. Cornelius gives generously and is described as devout and God-fearing. He practices traditional Jewish piety although he is a Gentile. So much so, that his prayers are a memorial before God. We don't have a backstory for Cornelius, but my spiritual imagination concludes that that his faith formation prepares him for this divine vision. Just like Peter, he too has a vision. Cornelius sees an angel and is afraid. But I'm most surprised by Cornelius's response. His faith and loyalty to God is astounding. His fear of the divine messenger doesn't stop him from immediately saying, "What is it, Lord?" Once the angel leaves, Cornelius calls his servants and immediately sends them ahead. Although Cornelius is afraid, his fear doesn't paralyze him. He is not a passive bystander, but an agent of action. His faith in the God he knows to be true, propels Cornelius to act. Both Peter and Cornelius experience an incomplete dream-vision. Little explanation or instruction are given. Yet Cornelius's unquestioning obedience stands in contrast to Peter's initial resistance. And this is

surprising, yet not inconsistent with Biblical journey stories. This paradigm is woven throughout Scripture—the ones who we least expect, understand the Kingdom of God far more than those considered righteous. The third layer of surprise comes from the Holy Spirit. We should all be surprised by how the Holy Spirit masterfully weaves together pieces of this journey story. I'm a lover of details and organization. When I read this text, I'm drawn to the symmetry and parallels. Cornelius is given a vision where an angel instructs him to send for Peter. Peter too is given a vision with a message of God's radical inclusion. These two divine visions take us on a journey to the climax of our story where Gentiles gathered by Cornelius are standing in front of Peter waiting to hear God's word. The gift of the Spirit descends on all who hear Peter preach. Awestruck and perhaps confused, the circumcised Jews bear witness to uncircumcised Gentiles speaking in tongues and glorifying God. This outpouring of the gift of Holy Spirit parallels Pentecost. Acts 10 is a journey story that highlights the beginning of the Gentile Church, comparable to the beginning of the renewed Israel Church in Acts 2. Many Biblical scholars refer to Acts 10 as the second Pentecost or the Gentile Pentecost. Acts 2 and Acts 10 highlight new beginnings of journey stories empowered by Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is leading God's people in a new direction. And much like our question today, I can imagine many of Jesus's disciples asking, "Where do we go from here?" God's radical love and inclusion are easy to talk about. But if we continue reading the text, it leads the early church to wrestling with difficult questions. Questions like how are we now supposed to live in community? If Jews and Gentiles are now a part of a larger faith what does that practically look like for our life together? What does it mean to love your neighbor when you don't even understand your neighbor? What does it mean to faithfully journey together as people of God when you are so different and don't agree on much of anything? These are not easy questions. And the early church wrestles with how to answer them as they form a merged faith with a multiplicity of new voices. They ask questions

of holiness, identity, circumcision, dietary restrictions and perhaps many more that are not recorded in Scripture. My spiritual imagination leads me to think that the early church brought grief and confusion into this question. Perhaps there were some angry people that wanted things to go back to normal. What is God doing, messing up our religious system? First Pentecost comes and messes up our understanding of God and now this? God are you ever going to let us catch our breath? Perhaps there were some who longed for the past and tried to recreate it. Further still, maybe there were some who didn't accept the Gentiles even though God's expansive love drew them in. I can imagine there were many people who left the early church. Letting go of prejudices isn't easy and now they are called to love those who were once outside the circle. And not just love but embrace as kin. If we continue reading the text, Peter himself backs off Christ's radical inclusion of love when he journeys back to Jerusalem. Once Peter returns to Jerusalem and receives pressure from devout Jews, he tempers his divine message to become more palpable to those already in the church. But God is very patient with Peter. All throughout the Book of Acts Peter wrestles with accepting this radical love freely given to all. He wavers back and forth as God continues to work on his heart. Stephen Shoemaker says, "The struggle in Acts is for the church on mission to be as free as the gospel proclaims." And centuries later, isn't this still our struggle today? Whether it's paying off debt loan forgiveness or supporting government policies for immigrants, Christians are among the outspoken against loving widely. But this is our gospel that Christ commands us to preach! A love that is prodigal and knows no limits. Every time we draw the circle wide, Holy Spirit surprises us that God's prodigal love is wider still. Just when we think we've reached the limit of God's grace, it stretches further. Maybe you read this text and like me, the idea of drawing the circle wide sounds lovely. But you have lived experience that tells a different story. Churches agree theologically that we are called to draw the circle wide, but rarely do we agree on how this looks. Unfortunately,

history continues to show that real harm is done in the name of Jesus.

My last course in seminary is about the life and work of a pastor. But I'm deeply troubled that for a seminary who claims to be supportive of women in ministry, our entire reading list is from the perspective of heterosexual white male pastors. I burned with fire as I read my assignment for Monday. I don't want to Zoom into my class with guns blazing but my goodness, this reading doesn't sit well! There is validity in some parts but in many others, this perspective of pastoral leadership has blind spots and interpretations of Scripture that are too narrow. Where are the voices of women? People of color? Queer, transgender, or nonbinary folks? What about a disabled pastoral voice? Too often I sat in courses at Baylor University's Truett seminary and was made to feel excluded because I believed reading white male scholarship in conversation with other voices is necessary for a complete theological framework. At worst, other voices are viewed as unorthodox. At best, they're marginalized and viewed as supplemental reading material, but the real theological genius is from white men. What is the message that I've received as a Texas Baptist pastor's daughter and woman of color called to ministry? White heterosexual men are the standard, and their pastoral leadership and theological scholarship are trustworthy. Everybody else begins at the starting line of skepticism. We too have prejudices just like Peter! Far too few Christians can receive Christian leadership and theological training from women, people of color, disabled, or LGBTQ ministers. Ministers like that are not trusted. And this is deeply troubling for me. To be welcomed into a faith community, but not trusted. To have a powerful white male pastor use his influence to fund my scholarship but to not desire my ordination because he doesn't believe women should be ordained. What is the purpose for funding my theological education then? To stay quiet and submissive and become a good pastor's wife that's smart but doesn't push the limits? Because I'm the daughter of a good Baptist male pastor, I should be a good Baptist woman and stay

within a small circle. These are my optics from lived experience that I carry as I read Acts 10. We are currently experiencing an evolution in the global church. We are evolving from primarily white male leadership to a multiplicity of voices. But many people are resistant of this change. Much like Peter, Christians are pushing back. So now I ask this question, where do we go from here, Ravensworth Baptist Church?

From Acts 2 to Acts 10 God is moving and doing a lot of new things. As with most journey stories, God is ushering the early church to evolve. Where do we see God nudging us in the same way? Maybe you identify with Peter and are initially resistant to God's wide circle. We too have roots of prejudice we need to excavate. It's easier to engage with Christian literature written by white men but when was the last time you read from another perspective? What about a theologian of color or a queer pastor? How many Biblical commentaries do you own that are not written by white people? If the church is evolving our Biblical guides and scholarly sources must also evolve. Perhaps Cornelius is a character you connect with. God has given you an incomplete vision for the future. And with faithful obedience you act but are still waiting for divine guidance. Or perhaps like me, you position yourself in this story with the early church. You are perplexed but awestruck at what God is doing. You sense there is shift in what being community looks like. There is no going back to the way things were before. Yet imaginative power of Holy Spirit is surprising us in new ways.

The early church asked a lot of difficult questions as they evolved. We too at Ravensworth are asking hard questions. Questions like how do we move forward with Covid precautions?

What does this new normal look like and how should it impact our gathering? What about our neighbor churches, why can't we do what they're doing? Is it possible to still be community and disagree? When are

things ever going to feel normal again? How do we create meaningful faith formation at church and at home? How we use antiracist optics to decolonize Scripture and our church's sacred spaces? If you connect to any of these sentiments, please know you are in good company. Christians for centuries asked questions of what it means to evolve as the people of God. Questions like, "Where do we go from here?" Thankfully we are not alone. The God that met Cornelius and Peter through an incomplete vision of the future, meets us here. So let's not give up on each other. May we continue to journey together, may we continue to adapt, and re-learn what it means to be the people of God for this time. Amen.