

## I

Norm Stewart served as the men's basketball coach at the University of Missouri for over 30 years. Coach Stewart was born and raised in Missouri and was himself an alumnus of the University, and as a true son of Missouri, he was brought up to loathe everything about the state of Kansas.

The campus of the University of Missouri is only a few hours' drive from the campuses of both the University of Kansas and Kansas State University. But the legend about Coach Stewart is that his distaste for all things Kansas was so strong that when his teams had to play road games at Kansas or Kansas State, he saw to it that the bus was gassed up and the team was fed on the Missouri side of the state line, and no matter how late the game went, they never spent the night in Kansas, so as to keep from spending a single dime inside the Sunflower State.

Amon Carter was the longtime publisher of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* newspaper and hugely influential in Fort Worth's 20-th century transformation from a cow town into the 13-th largest city in the United States. Mr. Carter played a key part in Fort Worth's part in the development of DFW International Airport. However, legend tells that he became so frustrated with his counterparts in Dallas in the negotiations over the airport that for the

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<sup>1</sup> These legends about Norm Stewart and Amon Carter are almost certainly apocryphal; they were told to me when I was a student at

rest of his days, whenever he attended a lunch or dinner meeting in Dallas County, no matter how fine the restaurant, Mr. Carter packed a sack lunch, refusing to spend a dime of his money in the city or county of Dallas.<sup>1</sup>

In the movie *The Lion King*, the king takes his son up to a high rock and shows him the kingdom, explaining that one day, everything the light touches will be his kingdom. The son surveys it all, and then notices a shadowy place on the horizon, and he says to his father, "What about that shadowy place over there?" And his father sternly warns him, "That's beyond our borders. You must never go there."<sup>2</sup>

## II

I think that's part of the human experience. I think as we humans are being raised, we are taught, sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly, that there are certain places that are beyond our borders, places that we must never go. We are taught that our people stay over here, and that place is for those people. And the assumption, again, usually implicitly, is that the people over here with us are our kind of people and generally good, but those people over there are suspect at best and it's best just not to be associated with them.

And I think that impulse has developed over thousands of years of our existence as a species. For

Missouri and a resident of Fort Worth, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> *The Lion King* (Disney Pictures), 1994.

thousands of years, we human beings lacked the capacity to travel very far beyond the place where we were born. We human beings are not the biggest or fastest or strongest creatures on the planet, so we learned to survive by living together in small groups and tribes, and our small group or tribe was competing for food and water and other resources with other tribes.

And so our human inclination to draw lines around our territory and their territory, our people and those people, is not just developed from school rivalries or grudges from past business deals. It runs deep in our memory as a species.

But what happens when that human impulse collides with the movement of the Holy Spirit? That's the question that is before us in our text this morning from the Book of Acts.

### III

The Book of Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles as it's formally known, is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then Acts tells the story of the birth and growth of the church, blown from Jerusalem out into the rest of the world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But before we get to the story for today, we need to remind ourselves about a few historical and cultural details. We can never forget that Jesus and all of his first disciples were first-century Jews. They were born and

raised learning all the stories and customs of their religion and culture, and one of the key features of first-century Judaism was a concern about cleanliness – not just in terms of clean bodies and clean foods, but righteous living with both God and neighbor.

Within first-century Judaism, there were a number of ways to get oneself dirty, that is, to become ritually unclean. Eating foods that were prohibited in the Torah, the first five books of the bible, was one way. Being any place where emperors or foreign gods were worshiped was another. Spending the night in the home of someone who was not Jewish was yet another.

Our story for this morning is set in the city of Caesarea. For devout first-century Jews, Caesarea was viewed as a shadowy place beyond the borders. Some years before the birth of Jesus, one of the Herodian kings, with the financial and engineering backing of the Roman empire and enslaved laborers, built an entire city along an otherwise empty stretch of beach on the Mediterranean coast. Herod saw to it that this new Roman city, built smack-dab in Israelite territory, was a proper Roman city, complete with an amphitheater, a racetrack for chariot races, a beautiful seafront palace for the Roman governors, including one Pontius Pilate. It was filled with shrines and temples dedicated to Roman gods. And as if this new city wasn't Roman enough, Herod named it Caesarea Maritima, or roughly, Caesar's port.

Caesarea Maritima was in every way imaginable Gentile country, that is, a place that faithful Jews were instructed to avoid lest they become ritually unclean.

But as it turns out, the Holy Spirit is not bound by human borders. A Roman soldier in Caesarea named Cornelius, an officer in charge of 100 men, had a vision from God.

And so now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Acts 10. The whole chapter is a fascinating read, but for today's purposes we will turn our attention to verses 1-17 and 34 and 35. So listen now for a Word from God.

*10In 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.*

*9About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. 17Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate.*

*34Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

So Peter, Jesus' right-hand man, the one called the Rock, the de facto leader of the disciples after Jesus' resurrection, goes to Caesarea, to Gentile territory, into the home of Cornelius. And there he breaks bread

with Cornelius and shares with him the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and Cornelius and his whole household are baptized.

But I submit to you that this is not a story about Peter's skill as an evangelist in converting a hardened Roman soldier into a God-fearing Christian. I submit to you that this is not a morality tale about a brave man who crossed social boundaries to make the point that deep down, we're all basically the same.

No, this is a story about the astonishing movement of the Holy Spirit, about the surprising, even scandalous news that the resurrection of Jesus isn't just good news for a select few, just for our kind of people in our kind of place, but rather it's good news for Jew and Gentile alike. This is a story about how we humans have this natural-born tendency to keep drawing lines around each other based on old rivalries and grudges and on whether or not we think those people are deserving of the things we want for ourselves, and about how the Holy Spirit keeps crossing those lines and knocking down those walls. This is a story about how in the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy Spirit testifies that God shows no partiality, but loves those of every nation who do what is right.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:18-24.

#### IV

My friend, God's love for you is so far beyond your imagining, and God's grace for you is so far beyond your ability to comprehend. There's nothing that God wouldn't give for you, including God's very self for you in Jesus Christ. God is absolutely crazy about you.

And it's not because of anything you said or didn't say or did or didn't do. It's not because of where you grew up or where you went to school or because of any prayer you once said or because of your net worth or your accomplishments. You cannot earn God's love – it's a gift given you because of God's goodness and mercy – that's why we call it grace.

But the thing is, God did not create you to live alone. God created you to live with other human beings. When we read the account of creation in the Book of Genesis, God keeps creating things and calling them good, but the first time God says something is not good is when God created the first human and said, "It is not good that the human should live alone." And so Genesis says that God caused the human to fall asleep and took a rib out of the human's body and made another human and placed them to live together, flesh of flesh and bone of bone.<sup>3</sup> We were made to live with other human beings.

A little later on, we read that God decided to a new thing. God called to an

elderly, childless couple named Abram and Sarai, and God promised that out of them God would bless them and make of them a great nation, so that in and through them, all the families of the earth would be blessed. God chose this couple not because they were stronger or younger or wealthier or more faithful than anyone else, but simply because God decided to use this particular family as the vehicle for God's blessing for all families. The descendants of this one elderly formerly childless couple, chosen by God to be the instrument of blessing for all the families of the earth, became known collectively by the name Israelites.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, and all of his first disciples, understood themselves to be part of this one particular family. They understood themselves to have a special relationship with God.

But after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, after the Holy Spirit blew the doors off of the church on Pentecost, the first disciples began to make an astonishing discovery. Gentiles, that is, women and men who were not raised as first-century Jews, women and men who knew nothing of Genesis the history of the Israelites, were nevertheless coming to faith that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet.

This was not something that the first-century Jews became comfortable with overnight. Did you notice that when Peter had the vision, he had to see

it three times? It's almost like Peter was saying, "Uh, God, I think we've got a bad connection here. Can you call me back?"

But the Holy Spirit led Peter to Caesarea Maritima, right into the heart of Gentile country, right into the home of a Roman centurion, an officer wearing the same uniform as the soldiers who mocked and beat and pierced Jesus just a few weeks before.

It was shocking, scandalous even. In fact, when Peter's friends in Jerusalem heard about where Peter had gone and what he had done, they called him to come back to Jerusalem and explain himself. The question about whether or not the good news about Jesus' resurrection was just good news for Jews or good news for the world is one that dominates much of the rest of the New Testament story.<sup>5</sup>

But let's come back to you, my friend. Think with me for a minute about the place where you grew up. What stories did you learn about your people, about your place? And what stories did you learn, either explicitly or implicitly, about the shadowy place beyond your borders. On what were those stories founded? Old rivalries? Grudges about dealings long ago? Misconceptions about human genetics? Just outright hatred?

Most of the time, we draw those lines without even thinking about it. It's deep within our memory as human beings. But I wonder. I wonder if the

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 11:1-18.

Holy Spirit is doing a new thing. I wonder if the Holy Spirit is calling you, my friend, to a new vision, a vision that looks beyond those borders of old grudges and rivalries and hatred.

In many bibles, the story before us today carries the sub-headline, “The Conversion of Cornelius.” But I wonder if the Holy Spirit didn’t convert Peter, too. For it was Peter who had to see the vision three times. It was Peter who was drawn by the Spirit into Caesarea, into Gentile territory. And it was Peter, himself a faithful first-century Jew, a direct descendant of Abraham and Sarah, the people whom God chose to be the instruments of blessing to all the families of the earth, who testified “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.”

## V

These are difficult days in our community, our nation, and our world. Old rivalries, old grudges, the sins of our ancestors, and just plain hatred seem to hover over every conversation. In our country especially, when conflict arises, we seem primed to expect the worst of each other, to let those rivalries and grudges and hatred and old, old stories cloud our vision. We seem primed and ready to reach for a weapon and to strike first, strike hard, and show no mercy.

But as a Georgia preacher warned us in the last century, we cannot long

survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, friends, if we are to survive, not just as a church, not just as a community, not just as a nation, but as a *species* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are going to have to see each other with the vision of the Holy Spirit.

We are going to have to learn to look not for the worst from each other, but rather for what is good and right and acceptable to God in each other.

For truly, God shows no partiality.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “On Being a Good Neighbor,” in *Strength to Love*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 38.