

- I. Advanced Organizer
- A. I want to start this morning by inviting a moment of reflection together. Specifically, I'd like to invite you to **think about some area of your life where at some point you may have seen something meaningfully shift** that's allowed you to step more fully into who you are or how you were able to show up in the world. This could be a shift in a relationship. A shift in your thinking or understanding or faith. It could be a move geographically or a move of jobs. **But look for some place where you saw something develop in you.** And I invite you consider, **where did that start, and what did it take to move forward into bringing growth and change for the better in your life?**
- B. Well, we're **rounding the bend on this series** we've been in the midst of throughout the fall into winter, called **Community Evolving**. Over the last few months we've been considering how our understanding, including spiritual understanding, can grow and change over time, as well as what it means to do that along side one another. As we begin to wrap this series, I thought it might be interesting to look to the era of the earliest Jesus-following communities, and consider some of the shifts that happened after Jesus died, was resurrected, and returned in some way to the Divine. So over these last two teachings in this set of conversations, we're going to look at a story in two parts that's found in the sequel to the gospel of Luke, the book of Acts. Think of it as a kind of case study from the early church. We'll see where Jesus-followers discerned a new thing that the Divine seemed to be doing in their midst and then had to make decisions about how they as a collective needed to respond and potentially organize differently. **What did community evolving look like for those early people of faith and how might their experience inform our own evolving?**
- C. So the story we're looking at today is honestly one of my favorite in the New Testament. It's a story that has had a big impact on my own journey of evolving and by extension has been a part of shaping who Haven has become, even though I haven't actually taught on it by my records since probably the first or second year of Haven. So I think we're due.
- II. This story from Acts brings together **two characters who meet under pretty unusual circumstances**. One of them is someone many of us are familiar with: **Simon Peter**, the close friend and follower of Jesus who started as a fisherman but is now a central leader in the early Jesus-following collective. Another is a character who may be new to many of us: a commander in the Roman army named **Cornelius**. It's a rather long story so I'll summarize how it starts and we'll actually start reading part way through.
- A. The story starts by introducing us to **Cornelius the centurion**, which means in the Roman army at the time that he was the commander of 100 soldiers. This is a man of **great status and authority**, and he's stationed at a place called Caesaria, which at the time would be the regional center of Roman government, like the **Roman capital in the area**, and the local headquarters of the Roman army.
1. But when we meet Cornelius, we don't see him commanding his soldiers or fulfilling other government duties, we **find him praying to Yahweh, the God of Israel**, as Luke the storyteller tells us he often does. Because apparently, Cornelius is more than just a tough Roman soldier. He also seemed to be one of a minority of people called "**God-fearers**" **who lived alongside Jewish people in the ancient world, and adopted some of their spiritual practices**. The storyteller Luke tells us that this soldier and his whole household prayed to God regularly and gave generously to the poor.
 2. Something important to remember about the "God-fearing community" is that folks like Cornelius, or the eunuch from Ethiopia we meet in Acts a few chapters earlier; **they were not full converts to Judaism**. People like Cornelius were not circumcised. They did not

go through ritual cleansing. They did not observe the Jewish dietary laws or practice the sacrifices that they did, but they have real respect for the Jewish faith and those who practice it and the God they worship.

3. So the story begins with **Cornelius praying and as he prays he has an incredible vision of an angel, and this angel gives him some specific instructions.** The angel tells him to send some of his people to a town about 30 miles away called Joppa. There they are to look for a man that we know but this soldier doesn't: Simon Peter. Cornelius immediately follows the divine instructions and sends a couple of servants and one of his soldiers off to find this Peter and bring him back.

B. Then the focus shifts to the next day, and toward that town called Joppa. In Joppa, **we find Peter on the roof of the house he's staying in, also praying.** And like Cornelius, he also has a vision while he's praying.

1. Now this vision needs a bit of cultural explanation to make much sense. **Peter, of course, like all of his fellow Jewish community members, kept kosher.** He followed important dietary restrictions that had long been passed down through the generations and were a significant cultural marker for what it meant to be a Jewish person. This meant that Peter, like Jesus and their other Jewish friends did not eat a number of different animals which the law of Moses had declared unclean. The practice of observing these cleanliness codes was so stringent that if any clean animals even had any contact with animals that were considered "unclean", they believed that the unclean would contaminate the "clean" animals that Jews were permitted to eat, so none would be permissible. It was something they took really seriously and worked hard to observe in order to honor Yahweh.
2. So while Peter is praying on the roof, and he's hungry, he's waiting for lunch, **he has a picture of a sort of divine tablecloth being lowered of animals** – and the animals are a mix of clean and unclean, which means, because of they cross-contamination, they are all effectively "unclean". **And as he sees the sheet lowering he hears a voice saying "kill and eat".** But Peter is shocked and responds **"Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."**
3. Well the vision is persistent because this doesn't just happen once; **it happens again and again...three times,** and each time Peter is corrected and told by the voice, **"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."**
4. Dramatically, as soon as this happens the third time, voices are heard from below. Peter goes downstairs and greets a set of visitors there, these three men that they have been sent by a Roman Commander in Caesaria, and they tell him that the commander would like Peter to come to his house so he can hear what Peter has to say. Peter responds by doing something unusual, inviting these non-Jewish people into the Jewish home he's residing in, encouraging them to spend the night so that the next day they can do something even more strange. He gathers a couple of his friends from the church there and **they go together with the visitors to meet this Roman gentile in his home in the most Roman gentile place around.** So let's pick up reading the story now, starting with verse 24.

C. 24 They arrived in Caesarea the following day. Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being just like you!" 27 So they talked together and went inside, where many others were assembled.

28 Peter told them, “You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. 29 So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me.”

30 Cornelius replied, “Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o’clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. 31 He told me, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! 32 Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.’ 33 So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you.”

34 Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. 35 In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. 36 This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. 38 And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

39 “And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, 40 but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, 41 not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. 43 He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”

44 Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. 45 The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. 46 For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Then Peter asked, 47 “Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?” 48 So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Afterward Cornelius asked him to stay with them for several days.

- D. So this is a revolutionary moment. **It’s an evolutionary moment.** Something has been radically altered about the way this kin-dom of God that Jesus spoke of is being embodied, and **because of this transformative moment what comes after will never be the same as what comes before.** For the first time in the history of this Yahweh centered faith, the good news of the Divine seen in Jesus has been shared and God’s presence has manifested

through the Holy Spirit being received by **a group of people that look different than ever before**. Their kitchens are not kosher. Their sabbaths are not necessarily restful. And if they are men like Cornelius, **their foreskins are likely intact**.

1. This may seem like a weird thing to note to us, but for this community of early Jesus followers, this was pretty notable and frankly shocking. Since the arrival of Jesus, people like Peter had seen the kin-dom of God advancing. It had become more and more inclusive, bringing in all kinds of folks from the outskirts of religious life: women, the poor, lepers, Samaritans, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. The early church continued this expansion, but thus far, **nearly all the people the good news had been shared with had something in common. They were all born Jewish or were converts to Judaism**. Essentially, if they were men, they were circumcised...
2. Until this shocking moment. **This story of an evolutionary move forward also becomes one of the first scandals of the early church**. As we'll see in part two in a couple weeks, shortly after this incident Peter is called by the other Jewish followers of Jesus to explain why he is fraternizing with and baptizing these gentiles, and before too long a whole council of early church leaders would be convened to decide what to do about the gentile problem. **But what evolution is exactly taking place? Who is evolving, in what way and how?**
3. In many Bibles or study guides for Acts, this passage is often titled "The Conversion of Cornelius." But is that the only way to understand this story? To be sure, **Cornelius' faith is certainly evolving**. He and his family and friends are moving forward in a significant way. Their spiritual journey is unfolding because the Divine has met them where they are at and God is inviting them into more. They accept the invitation and experience significant, life-transforming blessing as a result.
 - a) But Cornelius and his friends are not the only ones invited into transformation. In preparing for this teaching I read a number of commentaries and two reflection that I found most helpful both came, perhaps not surprisingly from biblical scholars who are also black women, Dr. Olive Hemmings and Dr. Mitzi Smith. As Dr. Hemmings describes our story, **this text is "not a story of Cornelius' conversion, but a story of Peter's Liberation. The God-fearing and just Cornelius waits for Peter's awakening so that he may receive the good news of God's salvation."**
 - b) If Cornelius and his friends are going to continue on the unfolding of their spiritual journey, **Peter and his friends need to wake up**. They need to evolve so this new spiritual movement they're all a part of can evolve.
4. At the center of Peter's evolution, or "liberation" as Dr. Hemmings described it, is **a new understanding**, best encapsulated in his response after hearing Cornelius' story and processing that the same God who was speaking to him had spoken to this uncircumcised soldier in front of him. **"I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism," he says**.
 - a) What exactly is he realizing? The actual Greek words that are translated for us, "shows no favoritism" say something a bit more obscure in the original language. A more exact translation would be "God is not a face-receiver" or God does not "receive the face". The Greek word for face in this case is more expansive than this part of the head. It includes that, but it also means the general outward appearance. As Dr. Mitzi Smith explains, **"The face refers to physical characteristics and to generally humanly determinable distinctions such as ethnicity, gender, age, and race."** In other words, God's not persuaded by outward appearances. God doesn't discriminate based on outward appearances.

5. When Peter and his friends looked at Cornelius and his household, they likely had bigger internal biases to overcome than simply concern over their ethnicity and cultural practices as gentiles. Remember, **Cornelius was a Roman soldier**. Roman soldiers were the violent occupy-ers of the Jewish homeland. They were also the ones who at the urging of Jewish religious leaders had just killed Jesus. You might understand why Peter would be inclined to look at Cornelius with a fair amount of suspicion. But here in this moment, the Divine is revealing to Cornelius that if he allows his own internal biases - some of which may have been developed for good reason, to keep Peter and his friends from harm - but if he allows those biases to limit where he will follow the Divine, if he, Peter is a “face-receiver”, he’ll miss what God is doing to evolve this sacred kin-dom in his midst. He will miss the work of Jesus expanding. He will get in the way of God’s evolutionary work. For God is not a “face-receiver” God is not as the King James translates it “a respecter of persons”. God shows no favoritism.
- III. So what might we learn from this story about how spiritual evolution can happen? I see a few components of the evolving process we might take from this story as a potential case study, and consider how they might look in our own day and time.
- A. The first is **Powerful Spiritual Experiences**.
 1. Both Cornelius and Peter are led to this encounter together through having powerful spiritual experiences. The **story starts for each of them in prayer. Each of them has a vision** - Cornelius sees an angel who gives him very specific instruction. Peter has a picture of a sheet of animals lowered before him and instructions from the Divine. Neither of these men is the catalyst in this story - it is **God who is driving this evolution forward**. But each of these leaders are playing their part. They are praying. They are seeking the Divine. They are inviting God to speak to them. They are open to spiritual experience, and so they are given an opportunity to partner with what the Spirit wants to do in their time. It starts with **making room for spiritual experiences**.
 2. As I’ve been praying myself in recent weeks about where the Divine might be leading us this year, I personally have had a sense that we too need to be **making space with openness and expectation for genuine spiritual experiences**. That if we want to continue to evolve as a spiritual community like we’ve been talking about for the last few months, that that means finding ways in our contexts to encounter the Divine and hear what messages She may be speaking to us.
 3. When I was on sabbatical last summer, I was praying during a personal retreat, asking God if there was a new insight, a new revelation I was supposed to bring back with me. And I felt like if I heard anything it was correction. **“That’s not your job anymore, just to hear on behalf of the community. Your community is the receiver of revelation for Haven now.”** As I’ve continued to meditate and consider that in the six months since I’ve returned, I’ve come to sense that **what was being spoken was not a one-time thing**. It wasn’t about coming back, hearing the clear word you all had and moving forward, as much as I was hoping that would be the case. Rather I think what the Spirit was speaking to me was about an **ongoing process, an orientation, a way of growing with the Divine that can unfold and evolve over time**. And that process is rooted in **ongoing practices that open each of us up to connecting personally with the Sacred and then having room for giving voice to what we sense the Spirit saying to us**. This is something I hope we can prioritize this year, finding new ways to grow spiritually, to connect with the Divine, whether that’s through new spiritual and creative practices like Luca led folks through last week in his Creative Meditation session, or returning to practices that may

have been meaningful in the past but we've perhaps stepped away from and are ready to engage in a new way like listening prayer or studying Scripture together.

4. Still, as the story shows us, having the powerful spiritual encounter isn't the only thing needed for evolution to take place.

B. Next comes a **Willingness to Risk**.

1. Both Cornelius and Peter were **motivated to take action after they had their experiences**. It wasn't enough to be moved internally, the movement required external follow-through. For both of them, that follow through came with some risk. One might imagine the social risks that Cornelius took in terms of reputation and respect as a leader in his community, to immediately send for this poor itinerant Jewish preacher and invite all of his closest friends and family to his house to hear what he had to say. He wasn't keeping his "God-fearing" status a secret, even though most of the Romans he knew would not be praying to Yahweh but would be polytheists, participating in worship of all of the many Roman deities endorsed by the state. **But Cornelius isn't held back by concerns to his reputation. He takes the risk.**
2. Peter in the same way, thanks to the insight of his vision, is **willing to go**. He doesn't fully get it, he has yet to understand that God is not a "face-receiver" but he senses enough of the Spirit in his midst that he is also willing to risk. He's willing to go. He's willing to visit a place he and his other early church leaders have never been - the home of a gentile. And because he risks and follows the divine prompting he's given, he's able to experience more transformation. He experiences the liberation Olive Hemmings described. And that brings us to the third step I notice in this evolution.

C. **Humble Openness to Expanding Awareness**

1. Peter's liberation and Cornelius' spiritual unfolding are **invitations to both of them into an awareness of the God that is bigger than any of them**. Sometimes its with folks like Peter who think they know and understand the Divine that **this kind of expansion is the most challenging**. It takes humility to recognize and see that you may have been wrong, at least in part. That God may be doing a new thing. That as much as you understood before there was still more to understand.
2. Earlier in this series, I shared one model of spirituality evolving. As I think about this story and this liberation moment that Peter, as well as the early church he's leading is going through here, another model I've seen through the years came to mind, **one that's similar to what we studied before, but in some ways simpler**.
3. This model is just a **series of stick figures**. The stick figure of course is the person, the spiritual sojourner. And the circle is ultimate truth or reality.
 - a) In the first stage **truth is above**, it's up there. It's God. It's transcendent, above us and we find ourselves reaching heavenward.
 - b) The second stage, the **truth is where we are**; we feel some mastery of it, some capacity to hold it and work with it.
 - c) Sometimes there might be a third stage, where like adolescents we perhaps **feel over the truth**. We are on top of it.
 - d) And then in the fourth stage we realize that **truth is all around us. Its much bigger than we ever knew**. We're humbled before it.
4. **This is the revelation that both Cornelius and Peter are having. Whatever they thought they knew about the world, about the spiritual realm, about God, it was not everything**. There is more. When encountering something outside their worldview, outside their norm of experience, they don't shut it out, they don't rationalize it away. They don't

let confirmation bias block their capacity to engage. They each in their own way show humility as they allow their understanding to expand and evolve. How might each of us in our time and cultural place need to do the same?

- IV. Of course this story **laid the ground work for many of us** who have become a part of this Jesus-centered tradition without being born or becoming full converts to Judaism. But it's implications are beyond that.
- A. **Julia A. Foote** was born in 1823 to two parents who were former slaves. Julia came to Christian faith and was passionately involved in the life of the church. She was a preacher and became the first woman to be ordained as a deacon and the second as an elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In her autobiography, Ms. Foote called upon words from Acts 10. ***“Bless the Lord, O my soul, for this wonderful salvation, that snatched me as a brand from the burning, even me, a poor, ignorant girl! And will he not do for all what he did for me? Yes, yes; God is no respecter of person.”*** As Dr. Mitzi Smith points out, **“The truth that God shows no favoritism gave hope to a black woman familiar with slavery’s dehumanization of the black race, the racism that prohibited her from receiving communion before all whites had been served, and the ecclesial dogma that declared that God did not call women to preach.”** ***Julia Foote is part of the evolution of awareness that God shows no favoritism.***
- B. When I found myself as a seminary student and young pastor in training, looking ahead at the kind of spiritual community I felt called to start, but **told essentially by the system I was in that the church was not meant to fully include our LGBTQ family and friends, this story played a large part in convincing me differently.** I remember one particular moment, laying hands on a gay female friend of mine who had recently begun attending our church along with beautiful her wife and kids, and noticing the Holy Spirit come in a powerful way, not unlike what Peter noticed when he prayed for Cornelius. **My own ministry and by extension Haven, even the opening prayer we’ve composed and pray each time we gather is part of the evolution of awareness that God shows no favoritism.**
- V. We are here because we are a part of a faith and a spiritual community that is ever evolving. **And it is our turn to play our part in that continued evolution.** So friends, may we make space this year and beyond, to nurture together powerful spiritual experiences, and trust one another as we name what we believe the Divine is speaking in our midst. May we take risks, trying new things, even if they’re scary or we’re not sure how they’ll turn out to follow where the Spirit seems to be leading. And may we be open to an expanding awareness of the mystery of the Sacred. That the ultimate reality we call God, that which Jesus embodied and undergirds the kin-dom he preached is more expansive than we can imagine and we are invited to grow in for as long as we are open. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Consider sharing from your reflection at the beginning. Where did you see a meaningful shift in you becoming who you are? Where did that start and what moved it along? Are there any places of resonance with Peter’s or Cornelius’ stories of evolution?
2. Which of the three components Leah named (spiritual experiences, willingness to risk and openness to expanding awareness) come most naturally or are most appealing to you? Which feel like the most challenging? Why?
3. Where do you see our Haven values of safety, diversity and Jesus-centered spirituality at play in this story? What guidance might this story give us as we evolve in living out these values?