

# Outside the Comfort Zone

Acts 10:1-6, 9-20, 34, 35, 47, 48

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Sometimes all it takes is a change in perspective for a whole new world to open up. The way we see others determines how we interact with them and in many cases, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And a changed perspective may also require you to step outside your comfort zone.

Every police officer knows domestic disputes are the most dangerous calls to get. Better to go into an armed robbery than a domestic dispute, because both people may turn on you and become assailants. Recently I was the jury foreman for a case in Los Angeles County Court in Alhambra involving a domestic disturbance that resulted in the arrest of a husband and father -- the joys and responsibilities of jury duty for those of us who live in LA County!

This was years ago -- a very different domestic disturbance that turned ugly and led the neighbors to call the police. As the officers cautiously approached the door of the home, they heard yelling and arguing inside. Then suddenly a TV came crashing through the front window. The police knocked on the door. A man inside yelled, "Who is it?" The officer replied, "TV repairman!" It broke the ice and de-escalated the situation, and the man opened the door. Through humor and with gentleness, the officer was able to gain entry and calm the people down. Sometimes a changed perspective is all that is needed for a whole new world of possibilities to open up.

In Acts of the Apostles, what began as a domestic dispute among the Jewish people soon became a universal movement that changed the world. Our text today tells where that shift in perspective began in the early Church.

Several people from our church visited Scotland this summer at the conclusion of a study of the Reformation. We went back to our Presbyterian roots to learn more about the transformation of perspective that occurred during the Scottish Enlightenment – and how it changed the world. I read Arthur Herman's book, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*. "The true story of how Western Europe's poorest nation created our world and everything in it." He's been a professor of history at Georgetown University and George Mason University, and currently coordinates the Smithsonian's Western Heritage Program. Thoroughly researched, the book makes some bold claims about Scottish contributions to modern life.

I've also been reading Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. So there are counter claims to the assertion that the Scots invented the modern world, but there is indeed an impressive list of accomplishments included in the history of the Scots.

Herman concludes his book by stating,

As the first modern nation and culture, the Scots have by and large made the world a better place. They taught the world that true liberty requires a sense of personal obligation as well as individual rights. They showed how modern life can be spiritually as well as materially fulfilling. They showed how a respect for science and technology can combine with love for the arts: how private affluence can enhance a sense of civic responsibility; how political and economic democracy can flourish side by side; and how a confidence in the future depends on a reverence for the past.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Walter Scott famously said, "I am a Scot, and therefore I had to fight my way into the world." As a small example of the way the Scots have fought their way into the world,<sup>2&3</sup> listen to this list of accomplishments and contributions medicine:

- Chloroform for use in dentistry and anesthesia.
- Penicillin by Sir Alexander Fleming and,
- Insulin by John J. R. McCloud who won the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1923.
- Vaccine for typhoid fever and the first oxygen therapy and radiation therapy.
- David Livingstone, missionary and doctor to Africa (including Malawi)

Inventions in the home:

- The television: John Logie Baird (1923)
- The refrigerator: William Cullen(1748)
- The first electric bread toaster: Alan MacMasters (1893)
- The telephone – Alexander Graham Bell was born in Edinburgh.
- The flush toilet: Alexander Cumming (1775)

Transportation and industrialization:

- The pedal bicycle
- The overhead valve engine

<sup>1</sup> Herman, Arthur, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001) p. 428-429.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg. 387

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish\\_inventions\\_and\\_discoveries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_inventions_and_discoveries)

- The steam engine
- Coal gas lighting
- Europe's first passenger steamboat with the first practical screw propeller
- The first iron-hulled ship
- The hot blast oven
- The steam hammer
- Threshing machines.

It was the dedication to education and the great Universities of Scotland at Edinburgh (St. Andrews), at Glasgow, and at Aberdeen that produced remarkable discoveries in science, technology, philosophy, and economics. Adam Smith and David Hume were Scots. In literature they gave us *Peter Pan*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *James Bond* (played by Sean Connery who used to deliver milk in Edinburgh), and *Harry Potter*. Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Ian Fleming, JK Rowling. Not to mention Lipton Tea and Listerine (Dr. Lister made hospital surgery rooms antiseptic) and Singer sewing machines. I know you were thinking it was mostly Scotch whisky and golf that Scotland gave to the world but, you see, it is so much more than that.

John Witherspoon and James McCosh at Princeton came directly from the Scottish enlightenment and helped to shape Princeton University along similar lines. Witherspoon was the only clergy to sign the Declaration of Independence. Sometimes a small change in perspective leads to a remarkable transformation of the way you understand the world and how you live in it. Even Andrew Carnegie was a Scot. He famously said, "The United States was Scotland realized beyond the seas."<sup>4</sup>

John Knox's original *Book of Discipline* from 1560 called for a national system of education. Eighty years later the School Act was passed and within a generation nearly every parish in Scotland had some sort of school and a regular teacher. By 1750 one estimate of male literacy was at 75% in Scotland and only 53% in England. It would not be until the 1880's that the English would catch up to their northern neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

Our text today about the interaction between Peter and Cornelius is the longest narrative in Acts.

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4 Herman, *Ibid.* pg. 388

5 *Ibid.* pg. 23

It is a seven-act drama of sixty-six verses. Based upon the length alone, we are looking at the pivoting point for the entire book -- a turning point in the long drama of redemption. A change in perspective and thinking for Peter, and the early Church, led to an explosion of evangelism worldwide.

Today's text is about the remarkable and often surprising way that God moves in human life to accomplish his purpose. Those who were considered outside were now invited in; those who were not part of the family are now considered brothers and sisters; those who were thought to be unclean are now invited to a seat at the table. Like the early Christians, we very likely will have to learn to see things differently if we expect to see things from the Lord's perspective.

The story of Peter and Cornelius is a story of expanding vision and prejudice confronted. Cornelius is arguably the first Gentile welcomed into the family of faith; the first non-Jewish family baptized. The incident is just dripping with political and racial tension.

In our time, "The end of the Cold War has turned out to be not the start of an era of peace but instead an age of growing tribalism, and ethnic and religious conflict, according to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs. Region after region of the world has been reduced to what Thomas Hobbes called 'the war of every man against every man,' in which life becomes 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.'"<sup>6</sup>

Here's one example: Perhaps you saw the article in the paper this week entitled, "When Fear of Strangers is Fatal?" Lenore Skenazy tells of an incident this summer in India, where two-dozen innocent people died at the hands of mobs who were convinced they were meting out justice to kidnapers. One victim was a software engineer beaten to death after giving chocolates to children outside a school. One was a 65-year-old woman who got lost on a trip to a temple with her family and stopped to ask for directions. All five travelers were stripped and beaten with fists, sticks, and iron rods. This is what happens when "stranger-danger" runs rampant. "It turns out that fear of strangers is far more dangerous than strangers themselves," writes the author.

Child kidnapping is a real problem in India and Pakistan but it is leading to hysteria and stoking parental fears about predators which leads to vengeance and misguided attacks on innocent

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<sup>6</sup> Skenazy, Lenore, "When the Fear of Strangers is Fatal" *New York Times Op.Ed.* Friday August 24, 2018 p. A21

people. I'm not talking about being naïve. Especially with the recent report released from the Grand Jury investigation into the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania. Even within the Church there is sin and brokenness and evil. But don't let hysteria and fear win the day. How do you look at others? Has your life become more "solitary, poor, nasty, and brutish" lately? Sometimes a small change in perspective puts you in the world differently and it leads to moving beyond your comfort zone.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks was formerly the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations in London. He was knighted by the Queen in 2005 for his service to the community and interfaith relations and sits in the House of Lords. He quotes an Oxford Philosopher, John Plamenatz, who noted that "religious freedom was born in Europe in the 17th Century after a devastating series of religious wars. All it took was a single shift, from the belief that 'faith is the most important thing; therefore everyone should honor the one true faith,' to the belief that 'faith is the most important thing; therefore everyone should be free to honor his or her own faith.'" <sup>7</sup> It may be a small shift in thinking but it leads to vastly different ways of relating to others. We now seem to be engaged in conflict throughout the world to determine whether that idea and the values it engenders can endure. Will we continue to build upon the enlightenment that produced so much value in the world, or will we retreat into "stranger danger" and live small and over-protected lives?

Imagine for a moment just how difficult it must have been for these Jewish Christians, raised as they were with the belief that purity was of the highest value. They were set apart from the surrounding Gentiles and their filthy ways by their diet and their worship life – and now they had to rethink everything! Surely God was up to something new and it was barrier-breaking!

The story of Peter and Cornelius is a story of both the shame and the glory of Christian faith. It is a story of redefining who is "in" and who is "out"; who is "us" and who is "them;" who is "included" and who is "excluded" from the family of those who believe in Christ. I say that it is both the shame and the glory of Christian faith because the dream of God revealed to Peter has yet to be realized! We persist in dividing the world into "us" and "them" along racial and ethnic and national lines. But God seems to be leading us to a new perspective!

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The early Church came to the conclusion rather quickly that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not only for those who had been waiting for it (for the Messiah) among the Jews. No, the gospel was for everyone – everywhere! The old racial and class boundaries, the old national and gender exclusions, the old ways of thinking and structuring the world in terms of “us” and “them” were out the window. A new kind of community was beginning, a new kind of humanity; a new way of relating in the world. When Peter finally found his voice and began to speak, he put it this way, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”<sup>8</sup>

This summer several of us were able to see just how radical that idea has been in the history of the world. Faith changes your perspective and it leads to education and discovery -- opening up new ways of seeing and interacting in the world, and human life flourishes. Don't let “stranger danger” turn your life into something ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.’”

We've been talking all summer about the foundations for life and faith. I'm not talking about being naïve about evil in the world. I'm talking about deciding who you are going to be in the world, rather than allowing the world to squeeze you into its own mold. Will we continue to believe in the ideas of the enlightenment that produced such remarkable progress, or will we revert to a tribalism that narrows life into “us” and “them?”

“The world and the fullness thereof belongs to the Lord,” says the Psalmist. Sometimes all it takes is a changed perspective for a whole new world to open up! Amen

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8 Acts 10:34

