

I. Righteous

- A. I mean righteous is such a righteous word.
- B. It just sounds “righteous.”
- C. But what do we mean by it?
 - 1. Well, we are not using it in the sense of something that is perfectly wonderful; fine and genuine – like that ‘righteous ’57 Chevy.’
 - 2. No, we are talking about doing what is “right.” Doing what is in alignment with God’s will.
- D. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God has **“called us in righteousness, to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”**
- E. Then the Apostle Peter tells us, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but ***in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.***”
- F. Now there are those who would tell you that this only applies to Christians, that only Christians really fear God and you can’t

really do what is acceptable to God unless you are a Christian; that is, unless you have accepted all the right theology and doctrine and practices. But you know, that's not what Luke is telling us in this story from Acts, or what Peter learned and was preaching. In fact, that's kind of the position Peter had **before** his conversion in this story.

- G. To really understand what Peter was getting at when he said that, "***in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God;***" we need to see the story before and after his little speech that we just heard as our scripture.
- H. So sit back and let's hear Luke's story about the conversion of Peter.

II. Acts Chapter 10

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.

[That means that he commanded 100 soldiers in the Roman military.]

He was a devout man who feared God with all his household;

he gave generously to anyone in need and prayed constantly to God.

[Just to keep us honest here, Cornelius is a Roman and a pagan and the prayers were to the God he had grown up worshipping.

Remember there really isn't such a thing as Christianity at this point.

The two religions available in the region were Roman paganism and Judaism.]

One afternoon at about three o'clock Cornelius had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him,

'Cornelius.'

Corny, as his family knew him, stared at the angel in terror and said,

'What is it, Lord?'

The angel answered,

'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.'

When the angel who spoke to him had left, Corny called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as the men were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its

four corners.

In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air.

Then he heard a voice saying,

‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

But Peter said,

‘No way, Dude; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’

The voice said to him again, a second time,

‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’

This happened three times, and **the thing** was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Now 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.

They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him,

‘Look, three men are searching for you.

Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.’

So Peter went down to the men and said,

‘I am the one you are looking for.

What is the reason for your coming?’

They told him,

‘Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his

house and to hear what you have to say.'

So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.

The following day they came to Caesarea.

Corny was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him.

But Peter made him get up, saying, 'Stand up; I am only a mortal.'

And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; and he said to them,

'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile;

but God has shown me that ***I should not call anyone profane or unclean.***

So when I was sent for, I came without objection.

Now may I ask why you sent for me?'

Cornelius replied, 'Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me.

He said,

"Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.

Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea."

So, I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come.

So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.'

Gentiles Hear the Good News

Then Peter began to speak to them:

'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.

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching **peace** by Jesus Christ—who is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:

how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem.

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believed him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

The circumcised, that is Jewish, believers who had come

with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they invited him to stay for several days.

III. As we can see, what was important to God was righteousness, not doctrine or theology.

Peter didn't give any classes or a test, or insist on consent to a creed.

- A. It seems that God didn't care if these people followed all the right religious practices and rituals.
- B. And certainly they didn't have their theology right; they were Pagans.
- C. And it wasn't their ethnicity that mattered, they were Roman; and as such one might even put them into the category of Peter's enemy.
They will be the ones who will execute him.

- D. But none of this mattered.
What seemed to count to God was that they were righteous, that is they loved their neighbor even as they would like to be loved and they honored, loved God.
Simply put, they followed the commandment that Jesus has given us; to love God and to love your neighbor.

IV. So one might be tempted to think that what is important in this story was the conversion of Corny and his cohorts, but of even more importance was Peter's conversion.

- A. It was Peter's conversion to a more liberal and inclusive religious position that is the main point of the story and the issue that gave direction to Christianity.
- B. Though Peter finally comes to this insight in the dramatic story of Cornelius and his household, the gospel writer Luke has long been pushing this inclusive impulse.
1. After all, Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 declares that geographical bounds would not constrain the gospel.

2. Peter himself proclaims anew the prophecy of Joel that the Spirit would dawn upon "*all flesh*" (Acts 2:17).
3. An Ethiopian eunuch has already received baptism (Acts 8:26-40).
4. Even more, these promises began with the opening of Luke's gospel. Simeon declares that Jesus would be *both* "a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32).
5. Jesus' first sermon ends rather inauspiciously when he reminds his neighbors that Elijah shared the goodness of God beyond the bounds of Israel.
6. In other words, the Spirit long preceded Peter's realization.
Peter only came to realize the radical scope of this movement well after the Spirit had begun working.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=4/4/2010 Commentary on First Reading by Eric Barreto

- C. The epiphany, the revelation that Peter came to, was that no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey – God loves us and that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.**

V. Now this also gives us our marching orders.

A. As it concerns those of other faiths, it means that Jesus, the Christ, is also good news for them; just as he was for the pagan Romans.

1. You might notice from our story that Corny and his associates weren't really converted – they were simply accepted and affirmed.
2. That's right – Corny was already acceptable to God, it was Peter who was converted as he became -- Open and Affirming.

B. This also has ramifications for our Openness and Affirmation of those within Christianity who have beliefs and practices different from ours.

1. The United Church of Christ was founded on the notion that we are to be a united and uniting church.

2. Check out the words that run at the bottom of the



UCC logo.

“That they may all be one.”

3. But it’s hard being one with folks that believe differently and have different religious practices and polity.
4. Yet, I think Peter’s epiphany can give us guidance if we see that our unity may not be based on beliefs and ritual, but on righteousness.
5. We are acceptable to God not based on our beliefs and rituals, but based on our righteousness;
based on whether we love God and others;
whether our actions are in alignment with God’s will.
6. FISH – is great example of this unity.
FISH, the emergency relief agency in Broomfield to which we donate food time and money is the result of a good number of churches of very differing beliefs and practices coming together with prayers raised to God and bringing alms to those who are most in need.

7. And even within this congregation there are many with differing beliefs and preferences for different religious practices; but we come together to raise our prayers to God and to reach out with love to those most in need.

VI. And that my friends is just plain
RIGHTEOUS.
AMEN.