

## **“A Hesitant RSVP”**

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7-4-2021

Acts 10

I walked through the door only to see my dear friend surrounded in plexiglass. She's the administrator for a CPA firm and prior to April, all their business for the past year had been conducted virtually. Like many workplaces, as they began to ease back to in-person transactions, they had to determine what would make for a safe work environment. We were so glad to see one another and have an opportunity to go to lunch, but she had to walk down an aisle, turn left and then turn right to exit the plexiglass barrier. I had been to her workplace pre-pandemic and greeting her with a hug was just a reach across her desk. Not so this time.

That evening my husband was interested in hearing about my visit with our friend, Carol. “How was your day?” he asked expecting to be updated on Carol's life. Instead, I said, “You know, we should have bought stock in plexiglass.” On my mind was how many people I now interact with through a plexiglass barrier. I can see and hear the bank teller or the cashier at the grocery store or the receptionist at my doctor's office. But there's a barrier that wasn't there before the pandemic. And it's needed because we know that the viral transmission is through air droplets that we emit when speaking. So, it is for our protection... as are many barriers.

Safety, security and the need for protection is a basic human need, and I am thankful for barriers that give me protection. There are jersey barriers that keep me from running into the road construction area or driving off a bridge. There are barrier islands, which protect the mainland from erosion and storms. There is a physiological blood-brain barrier in my body. The central nervous system is wrapped in endothelial cells which allow nutrients to permeate but block those substances that could harm my brain. Our skin serves as a protective barrier.

Barriers are not only a part of our world. They are part of our very existence, and we depend on them for protection. I understand the protective mechanisms of jersey barriers, barrier islands, and the blood-brain barrier and even plexiglass. And I understand that I need and want protection from an abusive relationship or a dictator or an oligarchy or someone prone to violence.

But why do we put up social barriers that are based only on religious, ethnic, racial, gender and physical differences? What are we afraid of? What do we need protections from? One of the saddest things about barriers is when they prevent love, any kind. Claude McKay was a poet who lived from 1889-1948. Society did not allow him full expression of the love he shared with a woman. It would place him under suspicion to even look at her a certain way. There would be consequences. He wrote about this experience in a poem called “Barriers” that ends with the verse:

I cannot see upon your face,  
Love's softly glowing spark,  
For there's the barrier of race,  
You're fair and I am dark.

That wasn't so long ago.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles is the longest narrative in Acts and that should tell us something about its importance. It's a pivotal point in Acts, the breakthrough of a barrier that was quite prominent in the early church. The Jerusalem Christians had an understanding of insiders versus outsiders. Their confession of Jesus Christ as the Messiah was contained within the boundaries of a Messiah that had been promised to Israel. Everyone else was an outsider.

Well, we know what the Holy Spirit does with the barriers we put into place. It should have been no surprise that the Gospel message was going to extend way beyond the Jewish converts. There had been echoes of this in Jesus' ministry. At his Ascension, Jesus said that repentance and forgiveness must be proclaimed to all the nations. From the beginning of Acts, we are alerted to the fact that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles. That light had already started to shine beyond Jerusalem.

So perhaps Peter shouldn't have been surprised when he was told to go to Cornelius the Gentile's home, except that we can't possibly comprehend what a radical request that was for Peter and the Jewish traditions that were solidly in place in his life. To prepare for the instruction to go to Cornelius's home, God sends Peter a suggestive dream, one that Peter really needs to ponder.

He's puzzled and confused by the dream even after it's repeated for the third time. A sheet is lowered to the ground with four footed creatures, and reptiles and birds, and there's a voice that says, "Kill and eat." As hungry as Peter is, he reacts intensely, "Have you not read Leviticus? Nothing profane or unclean is going into my mouth... ever."

And the voice responds, "You don't get to decide what's clean and unclean." This is a stretch of Peter's world of TORAH, and his identity beyond what was imaginable. No wonder he was so puzzled. How could he possibly be asked to break down sacred law, ritual and custom?

Peter goes to Cornelius' home making it quite clear that it is Christ who is to be worshipped, not Peter. He gets that right, but he's a reluctant, hesitant guest to this occasion. There's no, "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for having me." Peter says, "You know, of course, that it's not lawful for me to be here with you. But I came offering no objection. So, what do you want?"

Back up a minute, Peter. You may have offered no objection, but you wanted to. Even the Holy Spirit expected your hesitation. It was Cornelius' faithfulness that drew him to God and that mattered to God, but as far as Peter was concerned, Cornelius was an outsider.

Who are the Corneliuses of today?

Joe, who was active duty, enlisted Navy spent most of his leave on mission trips. He was a contractor at heart and in skill and was able to teach and supervise many people with all kinds of experiences. He would find a job for everyone and as a result, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance loved to see Joe's groups come on site. So, much was accomplished.

Joe belonged to a church, and if you went on a mission trip with him, you would think that he was the most active member in his church. He wasn't at all. He was faithful to God and supported the church financially, but rarely darkened the threshold of the church on Sunday mornings.

One day, as he was correcting my dry wall work, I asked him about his church and what kept him away. "Well, my son lives with his mother during the week, and I have him on weekends. He has Tourettes syndrome, and maybe it's just me, but you know those barriers at Fort Meade that are in the ground, but ready to pop up at any moment when the base needs protecting. Well, that's what I feel like when I go through the doors of the church with my son. So, we do other things on Sundays, and I have mission trips."

Breaking down unnecessary barriers can begin at the grass roots, in our families, in our communities, with our neighbors, in our small groups here at Prince of Peace.

You have a very smart pastor in Elizabeth McLean, and I don't mean to tell tales out of school, but when she first introduced the idea of small groups to the deacons, the air in the room was hesitation. You know that's true, deacons, and hesitation for many reasons. In her own wonderful Elizabeth style, no way did she back down.

I want her to have every minute of her sabbatical, but how I wish she could experience the leadership in these groups that I have seen this summer. As subtle as it might be, barriers are broken down in these groups, trust is established. I've had the question posed to me several times about what is expected of these groups after the summer. The answers to that question are already stirring.

No one needs another "project" on their list of things to do. But I have already heard in these groups casual conversations that in their essence are about who else do we need to bring in and reach out to. Who is missing and why? In time, the Holy Spirit will provide answers, guidance, and energy for these groups.

We need to have the gentle and graced willingness that is not wrapped in expectations of immediate answers and not encased in tight mechanisms of going in and controlling the situation. Right now, we can delight in these groups, connecting with one another, breaking down some of the barriers that might exist and waiting to see where we are led, not with a project, but with a calling.

The Holy Spirit opened Peter's eyes to a new way of thinking. Peter went from hesitancy to visiting with Cornelius' household **for several days**. Did you hear that? **Several days**. This was not a quick visit. We don't have information about these several days and I would like some because I think they had a party. What food was on the buffet table? What did they drink? Who sat next to one another and what were the conversations? Did the Jewish Christians actually share bathroom arrangements with the Gentiles? Gracious!

The Holy Spirit did it again because the Holy Spirit is much bigger and more "other" than we think and can break down unnecessary barriers and expand our world when we least expect it.

Here's the thing:

God had no problem with Peter going to Cornelius' house. God had no problem with bringing the Gentiles and all people into the Gospel message of salvation and redemption. God would have no problem with Joe's son being in church on Sunday even with the outbursts caused by his disease.

The struggle Luke is communicating in this story is the process of our human decision making. It can take forever and barriers remain in place for reasons we can't even articulate. Peter will be challenged when he returns to Jerusalem and talks about his time in Cornelius' home. The jaws will drop, the eyes will widen, the expressions will harden. "You did what with Gentiles?"

No wonder it's so hard for us to catch up with God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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