

The Unwavering Church

Loves Beyond Itself

November 2, 2025

Acts 10:1 - 11:18

Introduction

A few weeks ago, I sat with Holly and the kids to watch the movie (SLIDE) **Hidden Figures**. If you haven't seen it, it tells the true story of three brilliant African-American women—Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson—who worked for NASA during the 1960s. Their calculations helped launch John Glenn into orbit and return him safely home.

But the movie is less about the space race than it is America's race problem in those years. There were significant walls of systemic, social, and institutional racism at play that took courage, conviction, and truth to tear down.

You see all three kinds of barriers on display: (SLIDES (3) as I say them)

- **Social racism:** In Katherine's open concept work area, a white coworker sets out a separate coffee pot labeled "Colored," implying not only that she was unwelcome, but that she was somehow harmful or dangerous to the white men and women in the room.
- **Systemic racism:** Dorothy Vaughan teaches herself to program the new IBM computer because no one will train "colored women." She broke the rules of the public library and NASA to learn how to do it. The system was built to keep her out—but she found a way to make it better.
- **Institutional racism:** Katherine had to walk half a mile just to find a "colored" restroom on the NASA campus. Mary was at first not allowed to take the necessary classes for her engineering degree b/c the school was only for white students. Both institutions were set up in a way that treated African-Americans as less human and therefore unworthy of the privileges and rights of American citizens.

(SLIDE - Series Title Slide) By the end of the movie, some of those walls come down. Dorothy leads the new computing division. Mary becomes NASA's first Black female engineer. **The "Colored Ladies Room" sign is smashed by a sledgehammer.**

Body

Just as **Hidden Figures** exposes the barriers that once separated people in our own country (bathrooms, coffee pots, and classrooms divided by race), Acts 10 and 11 expose the barriers that once separated people in the early church. What was playing out at NASA in the 1960's is a

faint echo of what was playing out in the first century: a system so ingrained, so accepted, that no one even questioned it until God Himself did.

Here is how it went down in Acts 10.

In Caesarea, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a devout and God-fearing man, receives a message from an angel instructing him to send for Peter in Joppa (30 miles away, one day travel by horse and chariot). Cornelius obeys by sending some guys the next day.

On that same day, Peter falls into a trance and sees a sheet descending from heaven filled with animals considered unclean under Jewish law. (SLIDE) When God tells him to “kill and eat,” Peter refuses—but God replies in **v. 15, “What God has made clean, do not call impure.”** This happened three times and then the vision for Peter ended.

Now, here’s what’s interesting. On the surface of it, what the Lord tells Peter in the vision seems like a no-brainer. On this sheet are things like pigs, lobsters, shrimp, frogs and rabbits ... all kinds of things that a Jew like Peter would have been forbidden to eat according to Jewish dietary food laws. Three times, the Lord says to Peter (essentially), “Eat it. It’s clean now. Eat it.”

Seems pretty straight forward, right? Surely Peter had seen a Gentile eating bacon and thought, “Man, I’d love being a Gentile at breakfast.” And now, he could!

But as you can tell from the text, the meaning of the vision was more weighty than food laws. **It wasn’t about eating lobster as much as it was about what the option of eating those things meant for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles at large.** (SLIDE) Look at Peter’s demeanor in **v. 17 – “Peter was deeply perplexed about what the vision he had seen might mean.”** So, clearly there’s more at stake than just “Eat bacon.”

Peter would not have to wait long to see it all come together. While he was still trying to think it all through, Cornelius’ men show up, and the Spirit speaks to Peter about them. (SLIDE) Look at vv. 19-20.

“Three men are here looking for you. Get up, go downstairs, and go with them with no doubts at all, because I have sent them.”

So Peter goes downstairs, identifies himself to the men, and hears their story, and something dawns on Peter about the meaning of his vision. And we can tell that something dawned on him because of what took place in vv. 23-24 – **Peter took Gentiles in the house, fed them, provided shelter for them overnight, then travelled with them back to Caesarea to see Cornelius and went in his house where his family and close friends were waiting for him.**

Illustration (SLIDE - Ted Lasso)

Many of you are no doubt familiar with the show TED LASSO on Apple TV. In season 1, Episode 1, American football Coach Lasso walks into a locker room where he doesn’t belong: a

British Soccer club. The show often plays on the awkwardness associated with the cultural differences, and I think that relates to what took place between Peter and the others in this moment. Not only was Cornelius a Gentile, he was also a Roman, and a Roman soldier. He was the polar opposite of Peter ... and let's not forget what Peter was capable of. This is the guy who chopped the ear off the worship intern when they tried to arrest Jesus. How badly could this meeting between Cornelius and Peter go?

(SLIDE - Title Slide) Well, it was interesting. At first, Cornelius worshiped Peter. Cornelius was a devout and God-fearing man, but he clearly had a lot to learn about God. Peter picked him up, and together they walked deeper into the home where Peter found himself surrounded by the Gentile family and friends of this Roman soldier. And Peter broke the awkward silence. L

None are Unclean (Made in God's Image)

Peter broke the awkward silence, and in so doing he reveals **the first major lesson that he learned** from his vision and what God was doing in this moment, namely, that there is no such thing as an unclean human being. All are made in God's image.

Look at vv. 28-29a. (SLIDE)

God has shown me that I must not call any person impure or unclean. That's why I came without any objection when I was sent for.

Isn't that fascinating?! Peter realizes that his dream wasn't so much about food as it was about people. Or perhaps it's better to say that the food was representative of the people who typically ate it. Therefore, not only was the food clean, the people were clean. ***"God has shown me that I must not call any person impure or unclean."***

Because Jews did call all other people groups unclean. Not because God told them to, but because, over time, they twisted their divine election into Jewish exclusivism: the belief that God's favor rested uniquely on Israel. Peter's worldview (and the Jews like him) was shaped by generations of cultural and religious separation from Gentiles. What was meant to be a calling to bless the world ... for them to be a light to the other nations ... became a barrier to keep the world out. And one of the ways this played itself out in day to day life for a devout Jew was that they would not enter a Gentile's home or sit at a Gentile's table. To them, the divide was absolute: holy Jews on one side, unclean people on the other.

Now, Peter wasn't ***hateful*** toward Gentiles; he was holy in the wrong way, assuming that faithfulness to God meant keeping Gentiles at arm's length, which led to an arrogant attitude of ethnic and nationalistic superiority. He was living in a habit of exclusion and God shocked him out of it with a vision of grace big enough for the whole world. They were great at loving themselves, but they could not love ***beyond*** themselves.

So, for Peter, this whole Cornelius and Gentile thing wasn't a minor adjustment—it was a complete rewiring of what holiness meant. The man who once said, 'I've never touched anything unclean,' is now eating Gentile food at a Gentile table with Gentile friends. That's grace doing demolition work. It's as if God takes a sledgehammer to the "Colored" sign hanging between heaven and earth and says, "What I have made clean, you must not call impure."

God Shows No Favoritism (Saved for God's Kingdom)

But even though he's learned THAT lesson ... even though he knows that's one reason why God gave him HIS vision, he doesn't know how Cornelius came to know about him and why he sent for him. So he asks in v. 29, "May I ask why you sent for me?" And in vv. 30-33, Cornelius tells Peter his story about his angelic vision.

And as Peter hears the story about the angel visiting Cornelius, **he realizes he's learning a second truth**: not just that Gentiles aren't impure or unclean, but that **God doesn't show favoritism when it comes to being right with Him**. Look at vv. 34-36. (SLIDE)

Now I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

Peter realizes that the reason God has put them together is so that he can tell them about Jesus. So Peter goes on to explain the gospel to them in vv. 37-43. And just as he comes to the end and says in v. 43, "... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins ...", the Holy Spirit came down in a fashion very similar to that of Pentecost.

So Peter and the other Jewish Christians look around and say, "Well, looks like we're having a baptismal service!" So they commanded them to be baptized and end up hanging out a few days, presumably discipling them in the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus.

(Slide - Title Slide) So you see, at first, Peter thought God was just cleaning up the Gentiles — making them acceptable enough to be around. But when the Spirit fell, he realized something far greater: God wasn't just making them clean; He was making them *His*. God wasn't just knocking down walls – he was opening heaven up. God didn't just clean the Gentiles—He claimed them. Gentiles are not just neighbors—they are family.

Conclusion/Application

All of this has serious ramifications for you and I and for Beech Haven as a church.

An Invitation to Faith

(SLIDE) First, this passage is **an invitation to faith**. Some of you might feel a lot like Cornelius. You respect God, you pray, you even try to do what's right — but deep down you know something's missing. You've been near the things of God, but you've never really known Him personally. And what this story shows us is that God has gone to great lengths to reach you. Cornelius didn't climb his way up to heaven — heaven came down to him. God sent an angel to arrange a meeting, a preacher to share the gospel, and His Spirit to open the door. And that means the door is open for you. You don't have to earn your place; you just have to walk through it. You don't have to make yourself clean; you just have to believe in the One who can make you clean. The same Jesus who opened heaven over Cornelius's house can open heaven over your heart today. Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name. Everyone — including you. If that's you today, after the service, head straight to our team at the tables. They are ready for you.

A Reorientation of Faith

But it's not only an invitation to faith for an unbeliever. (Slide) It is also a reorientation of faith for believers. For those of us who are in Christ, Peter's experience may very well be our own. The doctrine of creation informs us that every human being is made in God's image and worthy of our love and respect. The doctrine of salvation informs us that people from every nation, tribe, and tongue are becoming our family. (SLIDES as I say them)

- (SLIDE) This means that **we cannot label people** by their politics, their past, their preferences, their socio-economic status, their immigration status, their native language, or any other way the world works so very hard to separate us. Every person you'll meet this week bears the image of God.
- (SLIDE) Related, but worthy of a special shout out, is that this means **we cannot let our love of country take precedence over our love for the Kingdom**. Peter loved his people, his heritage, his nation. But when God showed him that the gospel was for all nations, Peter had to choose: Israel's boundaries or heaven's mission. Patriotism is good; partiality is not. When national identity outranks gospel identity, we've rebuilt the walls Jesus tore down.
- (SLIDE) This means that **holiness is not separation from sinners, but faithful presence among them**. Peter learned that holiness doesn't mean avoiding unclean people—it means entering unclean places with a clean heart.
- (SLIDE) Related, but worthy of a special shout out, is that this means **we need to work against our drift toward homogeneity**. You are no doubt familiar with the phrase, "Birds of a feather flock together." It doesn't matter what ethnicity or nationality you are. This is the draw. It's like when you're on vacation in a foreign country for many days and after awhile, you find yourself looking for and hoping for an American so you can talk to someone and laugh a little about your experience. You're drawn to them because they are like you. But that is not our city. That is not heaven. The gospel compels us to work against this drift in our hearts.

- (SLIDE) Lastly, this means that **God is already at work in people you'd least expect.** Before Peter ever preached, the Spirit was stirring in Cornelius's heart. You need to trust that God is ahead of you in the conversations He's calling you to have. Instead of saying, "They'd never believe," start saying, "Maybe God's already moving." So consider pulling a "Cornelius" this holiday season – make an unusual dinner invitation, and see where God may already be working.

(SLIDE - Title Slide) Church, what Peter saw that day was the unveiling of a mystery — the same wondrous mystery we're invited to behold and believe. The Son of God didn't just die for one people, one nation, or one kind of sinner. He came for all. He took what was unclean and made it His own. And that's what we celebrate when we sing — the mystery revealed, the barriers gone, the nations welcomed, and the Savior glorified.