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Claire Davidson Frederick
cdfrederick@mail.lipscomb.edu

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God is Up To Something (On the Other Side of the Wall)

Claire Davidson Frederick

This sermon was originally preached at the Doctor of Ministry Preaching Workshop at Lipscomb University. A modified version was preached at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures in Stauffer Chapel on May 8, 2015.

At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!” Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.” When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa (Acts 10.1–8).

Have you ever been invited to do cross-cultural ministry, engage a different population, or work in the margins of a foreign environment outside of your comfort zone? Maybe you’ve been asked to work in Tent City with a homeless population, and you’re not really the camping type. Or you were invited to teach VBS at the orphanage in Guatemala, and you’re not much of a “kid person.” Perhaps you’re a white music minister, and you’re asked to lead singing at a predominately black and urban congregation. Which songs will you choose? Or maybe, as a woman in Churches of Christ, you’re called to preach for the very first time at a preaching seminar at Lipscomb University in front of seasoned, veteran preachers. These invitations summon us to cross boundaries into the uncomfortable and the unfamiliar. But there’s a big difference between an uncomfortable environment and an unorthodox environment.

In today’s text, God is going to summon his servant Peter to an unorthodox environment on the other side of a cultural dividing wall—the living room of a Gentile named Cornelius. The town is Caesarea: **CAESAR**-rea . . . **Caesar**-ville . . . **Caesar**-land . . . **Gentile**-town! Built by Herod the Great and named for Augustus Ceasar, it was the capital of the Roman province of Judea; it housed the palatial residence of governors like Pontius Pilate; and was headquarters for Roman troops, the same type of troops who hung Jesus on the cross.

Cornelius is in a position of authority and power within this corrupt military infrastructure of the Empire. And for a Jew like Peter, Cornelius’s household is enemy territory . . . outside the boundaries of orthodoxy . . . unclean! But still, God has been up to something on the other side of the wall.

Cornelius is described as a devout man, who gives alms to the poor and who prays “at all times,” Luke says. This Gentile man of war is also a man of prayer. And God has been attentive to those prayers: “Hey, Cornelius! You, on the wrong side of the wall, I hear you, I see you, and I’m coming for you—to set you free and invite you into the true story of the whole world, the story of Jesus, who is making all things new.”

Like Hagar's *El Roi*, this is a God who *sees* Cornelius, a God who affirms his gifts and offerings, a God who's been working in Cornelius's life long before Peter the cross-cultural missionary makes his appearance. God's universal reign from the promise of Abraham onward has always had "the nations" in view. And in Acts 10, God's kingdom is about to do much more than simply draw near: it is about to take up residence in Caesar-ville.

Still, you can just imagine most people in Peter's Jewish-only circle of Christian friends would have bet their denarius that there was no way God would speak to **that person**, or work in **that place**, or operate in **that particular manner**. Some are so entrenched in the way God has worked in the past that they can't wrap their minds around the ways in which God might work in the future. Including *those* people? Speaking through *that* gender? Using a person of *that* reputation? But are we not also guilty of these same thoughts today? I know that for myself and for many in our rational Enlightenment tradition, we have a long history of putting God in a box. It's as if we told God: "God, you're only allowed to speak to us now through the text of the Bible and only inside the correct denominational walls and even then, only at the hours of 9:00, 11:00, and 6:00 on Sunday and 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday nights, okay?" And we've missed out on some movements of the Spirit and some opportunities that God may have had for us out there.

Folks, God is bigger than the box. The conversion of Cornelius to Christ was going to first involve the conversion of Peter *and the church* to a new understanding and a new vision of the ways in which God **has worked, is working, and can work** in our world today. God is not bound to our boundaries of orthodoxy. And though we may try and explain God or predict God with our tidy systematic theologies, the Spirit of God (like a wind) is never going to be fully contained in them or by them. God is always three steps ahead of us, at work on the other side of the wall.

I was recently called outside of my comfort zone into a new area of cross-cultural ministry, behind a wall of a different sort. The Tennessee Prison for Women in Nashville is where I've been teaching on Wednesday nights for the past six weeks. As part of Lipscomb University's LIFE Program, I'm facilitating a songwriting workshop; and we're providing the women with new tools, methods, and insights for telling their stories redemptively. I want my students to know that they are made in God's image, created to create, that their stories and voices matter, and that with God's help, they can bring beauty and creativity from the ashes and brokenness of their lives.

After only one night, I quickly realized that despite my missional efforts, I was not taking God to these women. God had already been at work on the other side of the wall for a long time before I arrived. One of my students "Sweetie"—a lesbian inmate, who's a former drug user and drug dealer—is a devout believer; and every single song or rap that she has written has been in praise of Jesus. The love, joy, and peace that she radiates are contagious.

In the Lipscomb Program the terms *insider* and *outsider* get mixed up and turned on their heads, so that the women who are incarcerated are actually referred to as the "inside" students; and we who are joining them from the Lipscomb community are the "outside" students. We go behind the prison walls to become outsiders. And the women, who for the most part have been labeled "outsiders" all their lives, now have an inside line to the kingdom.

Categorical shifts are just as difficult for us today as they were for Peter and Cornelius in the first century. We prefer the old order of categories—fixed and immovable. We like to be able to readily identify people and classify people and predict behavior. Those old-order categories carry certain *expectations* that certain humans are to fulfill. And if we can squeeze people into the molds of clean/unclean, redeemed/unredeemed, Jew/Greek, prisoner/free, male/female, then **we can feel safe**, because we can know who God's going to speak through and who God's going to use, and maybe then we can feel in control. And this worked really well for us until the kingdom of God came along breaking down walls and going behind barriers and busting up categories so that there remains but one identifier that eternally matters—and that is "child of God, new creation in Christ."

The funny thing about this though is that we're still so surprised by it all. Because if anyone reading the Bible for just a minute is paying any attention at all, they would notice that God has a compulsive habit

throughout Scripture of crossing boundaries, doing the unexpected, and being flat-out unorthodox. I mean, using Moses (a murderer) to lead God's people to freedom?! Using Rahab (a prostitute), Ruth (a foreigner to the covenant), and King David (a murderer and an adulterer) to be part of the family lineage of Jesus Christ?! Using Paul (a murderer) to be God's chosen instrument?! Seriously!

Another one of my students at the prison is a young woman in her late 20s named Bethany. She is currently serving a fifty-one-year sentence for the double homicide of her two newborn babies. I will never understand the darkness and the madness that took over her life and her situation on that tragic and awful day. But I do know this: **God has been at work in dramatic fashion on the other side of the wall**, and Bethany is a "child of God, new creation in Christ." Bethany knows the Lord. And because of this her life is not a waste. She still has something to offer the kingdom.

I recently began bringing in professional songwriters from the Nashville music industry to co-write with insiders like Bethany and Sweetie. One of the first people who visited a couple of weeks ago is a friend of mine named Hannah; she was widowed last year at the age of forty when her husband died of a heart attack in the middle of their kitchen, leaving behind Hannah and their four-year-old son. Hannah has been mad at God; and her faith, which was weak to begin with, waned after this tragedy. But two weeks ago on the other side of the wall, I watched some profound cross-cultural ministry taking place, as Sweetie and Bethany ministered to Hannah in her grief and anger.

The song they wrote that night was called "I Believe," a testament to faith through some really hard times. And whether or not Hannah fully believes the words she co-wrote with the two insiders, the bottom line is that she's still singing them today on the outside. And maybe those words will become truth for her. I have to trust that God is also at work in her process—stirring her spirit, drawing her near, and speaking to her behind the emotional walls that she has erected.

In the case of Peter and Cornelius, God was not stopped by a wall nor by the ways in which church had always looked. Where are the walls in our community today behind which God may already be at work—Katie Hays's living room?¹ The millennial coffeehouse? The gay bar? The laundromat? These spaces, like Cornelius's household, have the potential to become *Next Church*. It is our job to pay attention to the movement of God's Spirit into these unique locations and join God there.

Perhaps the greatest example of all of God's unorthodox methods and radical boundary crossing is the Incarnation itself, in which Jesus broached the wall between human and divine, *slipping on some skin to rescue humanity in our sin*. And that, my friends, is good news.

[The following lyric was written at the Tennessee Prison for Women:]

*I have love, hope, and peace this world can't understand
I have love, hope, and peace because He holds my hand
I have what the world cannot offer
He offers what the world cannot see
And because He holds my hand
I am free.*

CLAIRE DAVIDSON FREDERICK IS CURRENTLY COMPLETING HER MDiv AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, AND IS TEACHING SONGWRITING CLASSES TO WOMEN AT THE TENNESSEE PRISON FOR WOMEN (CDFREDERICK@MAIL.LIPSCOMB.EDU).



1. See Joel A. Brown and Katie Hays, "Galileo Church: A Disciples of Christ Experiment in Next Church," *Leaven* 23, no. 2 (2015): 107–111.