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Barriers in the Mind:

A Sermon for Missions Sunday

By Ken Durham

Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (Acts 10:13–15 NIV)

In his book *The Discoverers*, Daniel Boorstin tells the intriguing story of Cape Bojador. Cape Bojador is a small bump on the map of the western coast of Africa—a navigational hindrance to ships, but nothing exceptionally dangerous. But in the fifteenth century, no sea captain would dare sail past it—because, as far as anyone knew, no one ever had. There were rumors that it concealed unspeakable perils, even the edge of the world. In one ten-year period, Prince Henry the Navigator sent fifteen expeditions out to conquer the foreboding cape, only to have them all return home with various excuses as to why they could not. Eventually, a Portuguese ship made its way past Cape Bojador, but for many years it was simply, in Boorstin’s phrase, “a barrier in the mind.”

On this Mission Sunday, we are being asked to examine our willingness to support several teams of women and men who extend the reach of our church family’s gospel ministry far beyond this city. But it is also a good day for us to examine as well the limits of our own thinking about what you and I can do as bringers of good news.

No Way, Lord!

In Acts 10 we find Peter in a not-unfamiliar position: saying NO to the Lord. It has been noted that the words *no* and *Lord* may in combination yield a supreme oxymoron, but we hear them often on the lips of the big fisherman.

“Peter, I must go to Jerusalem and die.” “No way, Lord!” (Mark 8:31–33).

“Peter, I must wash your feet.” “No way, Lord!” (John 13:5–11).

“Peter, this night you will deny me three times.” “No way, Lord!” (Mark 14:27–31).

And now, here in Acts 10, the divine voice instructs Peter, “Get up, kill and eat.” And again, the reluctant disciple responds, “No way, Lord!”

You have to appreciate Peter’s unvarnished, knee-jerk honesty. Where I might mealy-mouth around—“Well, Lord, I’ll certainly give your proposition some thought and get back to you on that later . . .”—Peter usually let you know quickly and clearly where he stood. And sometimes where he stood was in stubborn resistance to his Lord’s will. But in all fairness to Peter, his Lord had this way of asking him to do things that at the time, on the face of it, made no sense to him whatsoever.

Like that day in Joppa, when he was trying to enjoy a few quiet moments on the rooftop of his friend Simon the tanner. His mind was divided. He wanted to pray, but he was hungry. Maybe the seductive smell of lunch preparations downstairs was just more than a man could ignore. So what began as a prayer turned into a vision about—what else—food! Under his nose dropped this large sheet full of all kinds of animals, including many that a good Jewish boy learned at an early age never to eat: fare like camels, pigs, lizards, buzzards. A most unkosher



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menu if there ever was one. And then, incredibly, he heard the voice of the Lord commanding him to “kill and eat.”

A Call to Mission

What’s going on here in Acts 10? A call to adventure. A call to transcend old barriers in the mind. A call to mission. Before Christianity could become a world religion, its church leaders had to broaden their vision of kingdom and community. Peter, for one, had to move well beyond the bounds of his comfort zone. Once again, it would seem, he was being invited to step out onto stormy seas, with only the word of the Lord to make sense of it.

For a few miles away over in Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius who had been searching for God. A military man, an officer (the equivalent of a captain or company commander today). And a good man. Devout, God-fearing, generous, respected by Jew and Gentile alike. But Cornelius was a Gentile, and the long-standing barriers between the Jews and the Gentiles were substantial, and not just in the mind. Whenever he walked through the Court of the Gentiles at the temple in Jerusalem, Cornelius met with physical barriers and signs that said in no uncertain terms, “Gentile, Keep Out.” We know exactly what those signs said because archaeologists have actually found

some of them. They read, “No foreigner [non-Jew] is to enter within the balustrade [railing] and enclosure around the temple area. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which will follow.” (And to make sure nobody missed it, the engraved letters of the warning were painted *red*!)

But all that was about to change forever. For now in the fullness of time, God was moving to remove those barriers. Cornelius had had his own vision, of an angel saying, “God is pleased with your faith and your charity, Cornelius. Go fetch a man named Peter staying in Joppa” (Acts 10:1–6).

So here stood Peter—up on the tanner’s rooftop, staring at this improbable vision of the sheet, and saying, again, “No way!” to God. (The Greek *medamos* here is emphatic: “Surely not! Not at all!”) Eat unclean food? No sir! Peter’s mama raised him with better table manners than that. But Peter would soon come to see that this revelation was not about food; it was about a kingdom transition that had been centuries in the making.

Running the Other Way

We can almost see the events of Acts 10 coming afar off in its Old Testament “sister story,” one with which it shares many common elements. In the prophets we are told of a reluctant messenger named

Jonah whom God called to preach to Gentiles in the metropolis of Nineveh. But Jonah ran the other direction (No way, Lord!), to the city of Joppa. Eventually he was swallowed by a great fish, unceremoniously vomited up on dry land (you can’t keep a good man down), and finally convinced (though he did not accept the fact enthusiastically) that God loves and forgives Gentiles, too.

Jonah, you see, is an even earlier story about foreign mission. About hearing the call of God to get past our prejudices and transcend our mind-barriers. And it’s also about God’s grace in dealing with disciples who sometimes run the other way when faith wavers. One of the most encouraging lines in Jonah is in verse 1 of chapter 3:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a **second time**: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” (Jonah 3:1–2 NIV)

Aren’t you thankful for the mercies of a God who gives his wavering and reluctant children more than one chance, who calls us to mission “a second time”? And again, and again?

Back to Peter. Like Jonah, he rethought his initial resistance to the Lord’s call and the next day traveled to Caesarea to meet the God-hungry soldier Cornelius. Cornelius immedi-

ately fell at Peter's feet. That was something centurions didn't typically do when they met Jewish fishermen. But Cornelius apparently was not the kind of person whose thinking was restricted by conventional barriers in the mind; he was too caught up in his search for God. This is the kind of person God changes the world with.

"Get up, get up," Peter said, "I'm just a man like you." And Peter, who had said "No way" to the Lord so many times, began to explain what he was beginning to learn about the church of Jesus Christ:

God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. . . . I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. (Acts 10:28, 34–35 NIV)

Racism is all too alive and well in enlightened, ethnocentric twenty-first-century America. And yes, that goes for church, too. A truly integrated congregation is a rarity these days. What "mission" most of us do, if we do much at all, is among our own kind. We pretty much accept the dividing walls of partition that society defines for us. But the God who created humankind—every flavor of us—in his image says "No way!" to that spirit of bigotry, however civil and sophisticated we may be in our practice of it. The message of Acts 10, to Peter and to the church of Jesus Christ at large, is clear: By the power of God's Spirit he intended to build, out of men and women who "fear him and do what is right," a community of barrier-

busters. Today, if we are serious about restoring the mission agenda of the first-century church, surely we cannot tolerate ungodly barriers among us on the basis of race or gender or caste.

On the heels of that radical social pronouncement Peter preached a model gospel sermon, and what followed has been called the Gentile Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile believers (to the astonishment of the Jewish believers present), and Cornelius and many members of his household were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:44–48).

And thus did Christianity become a world religion.

God Makes a Way

Peter said "No way" . . . but God made a way. So often that's how mission happens, isn't it? Our minds are closed to so many persons and possibilities by internal barriers of prejudice and tradition and small-mindedness. Then someone among us catches a glimpse of a vision from the Word . . . and dares to step out in bold trust and obedience . . . and before you know it, the Spirit is moving and lives are changing and barriers are crumbling and the darkness has been penetrated again by the light of Christ.

We have heard this call to mission before, haven't we? To be ambassadors, and salt, and light, and leaven—to be the touchable, compassionate, righteous, courageous body of Christ—wherever we find ourselves. In Mexico. Or in Thailand. Or in Russia. Or in inner-city L.A. Or right here in Malibu. Perhaps today

God is coming to you and me "a second time" . . . or a five-hundred-second time . . . with the call to "proclaim the message I give you." So what do we say? "No way"? Or, "I know the Lord will find a way"?

Several years ago I was in Brasilia, Brazil, to attend the Pan American Lectures, an annual event held somewhere in the Americas to raise consciousness about missions in the Churches of Christ. I found myself seated next to a young lady who looked to be about twenty-one. "I'm here in Brazil on a mission," she told me. (Uh huh, I thought to myself. Sounds like another case of a student on a two-week church junket, what some of us disdainfully call "the ministry of tourism." A beach campaign in Rio, perhaps?) "Well," I replied, "tell me about your mission." "I'm spending the year as a volunteer aide in a leper colony," she said. I cringed at my prejudgment all the way back to my four-star hotel room. I've not heard of or from her again. But she often makes her way past the barriers in my mind to challenge and refresh my view of "mission," to remind me of what it means to be a bringer of good news.

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Sources for this sermon included Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers*; Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*; Don Wardlaw, "Inviting Others to Our Table," in *Preaching Biblically*; William