

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR: Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10-11

5-Week Worship Series
for Lent or anytime



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Stepping Through the Door (Lent 2025) was written by Rev. Karen Behling, with input from Michelle Pride, Rev. Greg Kaufmann, Rev. Bob Giese, and Deacon David Behling.

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR: Cornelius & Peter in Acts 10-11

This 5-week series was written by Pastor Karen Behling for midweek Lenten worship at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Chippewa Falls, WI. It was written in response to her participation in the year-long study *Troubling the Waters for the Healing of the Church*. Within the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, this ELCA study was offered in 2023-2024 and co-facilitated by Deacon Lidixe Montoya and Michelle Pride.

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR

- Week 1 Into New Possibilities
- Week 2 And Leaving Baggage Behind
- Week 3 Beyond the Comfortable
- Week 4 Towards Friendship
- Week 5 To Embrace a New Reality

The display of an actual door could serve as a powerful image in worship. You may choose to leave the door “as is” each week, or you may choose to add to your display each week, as the story unfolds. Invite creative folk within your congregation to oversee any door display.

One voice may deliver the reading and message throughout the entire series. Or you may choose to invite a diversity of people to be involved over the five weeks, perhaps even involving some in acting out these Bible passages. There could be benefit in having one voice read the biblical text while another voice delivers the message. Note that the biblical text often comes within the commentary. Also, it may be fun to invite a child to offer the “Knock Knock” joke each week. Consider what may be most effective and engaging in your context.

Note that this series includes some stories from the author's life experiences. This is true specifically for Weeks 3 and 4. You are welcome

to use her stories with the noted introduction or it may be more effective in your context to include a story of your own.

Music suggestions are just that. Use what works well in your context. Please note, however, that the intent of Week 3 is to sing a song that is unfamiliar to the congregation and thus stir up some level of discomfort.

The use of images may be a regular part of your worship life, or you may wish to give it a try for this series. Suggestions are offered, using key words that yield plenty of options when doing an online search. Feel free to explore other options, mindful, of course, to verify that permission is granted for public use, and please give credit where appropriate. The cover photo is of Deacon Diane Kaufmann and may be meaningful to many within the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin and beyond. This image could work well throughout this series, and permission is granted by the Kaufmann family for such use.

This series was written with a specific congregation in mind. In consideration of the practice at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church for using Holden Evening Prayer for midweek Lenten worship, this series was designed to be inserted within that order of service. For those looking to shape a different order of service, consult the worship resource recommendations offered on the next page.

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WORSHIP RESOURCES

For those wishing to craft an order of service, the following resources may be helpful.

Resources in *All Creation Sings*

(also available online through Sundays and Seasons)

Service of Word and Prayer	pages 42-45
Prayer of Lament	page 61
Lamenting Racism	pages 62-63

FAITH STATEMENT

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.

**We trust in God. We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.**

**In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.**

[Statement of Faith, United Church of Canada]

Week 1**IMAGE**

A photo from Google Earth of your town/city/countryside or the famous “Earthrise” photo taken from Apollo 8.

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR into New Possibilities

Knock, knock

Who’s there?

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit who?

The Holy Spirit who calls us to step through the door to embrace new possibilities.

The charge is clear in **Acts 1:8**

You will be my witnesses

in Jerusalem,

in all Judea

and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.

NOTE: Offer the visual of an expandable ball or gesture with hands to show movement out from the center, reaching out farther and farther with each new place name. For those with projection capability, you might consider showing a series of images:

Jerusalem – a photo from Google Earth of your town/city/countryside.

Samaria – a photo of North America, focused on Mexico/Central America.

Ends of the Earth – “Earthrise” photo taken from Apollo 8.

Throughout the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit leads from one surprise to another. Whenever and wherever the followers of Jesus make a distinction, drawing a line or closing a door, differentiating US from THEM. . . . here

comes the Holy Spirit calling us to open that door, to cross that line, to erase that line, to see one another as God sees each of us – beloved – created in God's image, each and every one.

Over these next 5 weeks, we are going to focus on one story in the Bible, in the New Testament book of Acts – the story of Peter and Cornelius. As we will discover, these two people are so very different from one another – different races, different cultures, different languages, different economic status. They are also both men of prayer and devotion to God, and that's where this story begins. . . in prayer. . . . looking first at Cornelius, the outsider. . . . starting in Acts chapter 10.

CHAPTER 10:1-23

There was a man named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, captain of the Italian Guard stationed there. He was a thoroughly good man. He had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God, was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer. One day about three o'clock in the afternoon he had a vision. An angel of God, as real as his next-door neighbor, came in and said, "Cornelius."

Cornelius stared hard, wondering if he was seeing things. Then he said, "What do you want, sir?"

The angel said, "Your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. Here's what you are to do. Send men to Joppa to get Simon, the one everyone calls Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is down by the sea."

As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two servants and one particularly devout soldier from the guard. He went over with them in great detail everything that had just happened, and then sent them off to Joppa.

The next day as the three travelers were approaching the town, Peter went out on the balcony to pray. It was about noon. Peter got hungry and started

thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket lowered by ropes at its four corners settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: "Go to it, Peter - kill and eat."

Peter said, "Oh, no, Lord. I've never so much as tasted food that was not kosher."

The voice came a second time: "If God says it's okay, it's okay."

This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies.

As Peter, puzzled, sat there trying to figure out what it all meant, the men sent by Cornelius showed up at Simon's front door. They called in, asking if there was a Simon, also called Peter, staying there. Peter, lost in thought, didn't hear them, so the Spirit whispered to him, "Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Get down there and go with them. Don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I think I'm the man you're looking for. What's up?"

They said, "Captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man well-known for his fair play – ask any Jew in this part of the country – was commanded by a holy angel to get you and bring you to his house so he could hear what you had to say." Peter invited them in and made them feel at home.

SING #752 Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying (2-3 times)

Cornelius prays. God listens. Cornelius listens and learns of his surprising mission to search for and build a relationship with Peter.

Peter prays. God listens. Peter listens to God and is surprised by God's command. So shocking is this vision and the command to eat. Even after God sends the message three times, Peter is still puzzling over what God intends for him. It seems like God is asking him to cross what has been for him an uncrossable line. Could this be?

For all of Peter's life, kosher eating has been about very sharp, clear, distinct lines of separation – differentiating US from THEM. Is God erasing these lines? And then very quickly, it becomes clear to Peter that this vision is about so much more than food and the lunch that Peter anticipates.

When Peter listens, his very specific instructions from the Holy Spirit are to go to the door. Peter does not yet understand what and why, but whatever he does next will have everything to do with those who have come to the door – strangers, foreigners, outsiders. And Peter's first response is hospitality. Peter invites them in, helps them to feel at home, and invites conversation which opens the door to new relationships.

When we meet someone new or different, what is often our first response? Reluctance to speak? Discomfort? Fear of saying or doing the wrong thing? Peter reminds us that hospitality can be as simple as asking, "What's up?" Asking a question and listening carefully to the response can be a great way to start a conversation, the first step in growing a new relationship.

Peter welcomes these visitors as guests and helps them feel at home. Remember, those who have been sent by Cornelius are the outsiders, the foreigners. They acted boldly, walking through that door, entering into unfamiliar space, and Peter welcomed them graciously.

I think we often forget how much courage it takes to walk through a door into a new and unfamiliar space, full of new and unfamiliar people. When that happens – when someone new comes through the door of our

congregation – how do we respond? How do we engage newcomers in conversation, as Peter did? And before that, note that the Holy Spirit had nudged Peter to go in search of those who had come to the door. Peter did not wait for them to find him. Peter moved to greet them and to welcome them and to engage them in conversation. Through his body language, through his words, through his gestures, Peter stepped through the door into new possibilities.

While he was praying, Peter had been listening. . . .

SING #752 Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying (2-3 times)

Week 2

IMAGE

Person struggling to carry far too much

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR & Leaving Baggage Behind

Knock, knock

Who's there?

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit who?

The Holy Spirit who calls us to step through the door and leave our baggage behind.

Last week we were introduced to Cornelius. Cornelius is very different from Peter and the other apostles. His language is different. His culture is different. His race is different. His economic status is different.

Beyond their differences, though, Cornelius and Peter are both men of prayer and devotion to God. That devotion to God is revealed through their acts of service. And the Holy Spirit acts to bring them together. . . .

As we hear today's reading, take note whenever someone comes to a door, steps through a door, or opens a door. Take note when that happens literally, and take note when that happens through words or gestures. And yes, I am going to ask at the end.

Acts 10:1-23

There was a man named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, captain of the Italian Guard stationed there. He was a thoroughly good man. He had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God, was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer. One day about three o'clock in the afternoon he had a vision. An angel of God, as real as his next-door neighbor, came in and said, "Cornelius."

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As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two servants and one particularly devout soldier from the guard. He went over with them in great detail everything that had just happened, and then sent them off to Joppa.

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Peter, lost in thought, didn't hear them, so the Spirit whispered to him, "Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Get down there and go with them. Don't ask any questions. I sent them to get you."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I think I'm the man you're looking for. What's up?"

They said, "Captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man well-known for his fair play - ask any Jew in this part of the country - was commanded by a holy angel to get you and bring you to his house so he could hear what you had to say." Peter invited them in and made them feel at home.

What did you notice?

[Depending upon the size of the assembly, invite people to share in small groups or engage as one large group]

All of that movement – stepping through the door and extending hospitality – all of it comes as a response to prayer. It all started with prayer. It started with both Cornelius and Peter listening through prayer. The Holy Spirit called to them. They listened, and they responded, and two people who would likely have no other reason to interact with one another now find themselves being called to step through the door to meet one another. And let's be clear – in so very many ways, these two are very different from one another.

We may not know much about Cornelius, but we know a few important details. Cornelius lives nearby in Caesarea, but he is not from Caesarea. He is from Italy - a rather long way from home. His associates refer to him as Captain Cornelius. . . . so yes, that makes sense. . . .he is in the military – a leader in the military – stationed in Caesarea to act on behalf of the Roman Empire. Hmmm. . . . not the type with whom Peter usually associates. I suspect that Peter might even have some strong, negative opinions about Roman military leaders.

Remember that the Romans occupy and control the land where Peter lives. Peter has lived his whole life under Roman occupation. Surely he has been taught certain views about the Romans and their leaders. Surely Peter

himself holds certain assumptions – might we even say – prejudices about wealthy, powerful, foreign military leaders occupying his homeland?

But then Peter – and we – learn more about Cornelius who is described as a God-fearing man, regarded for his fairness – regarded so highly even by the local Jewish folk. And Cornelius is a man of prayer who has sent these men in search of Peter precisely in response to what Cornelius heard through prayer. Cornelius sounds to be a good neighbor who acts like a good neighbor and lives like a good neighbor. Sounds like any sort of stereotypes about foreign outsiders simply do not hold, nor do they apply, to Cornelius.

Thankfully, Peter models for us extending hospitality BEFORE he learns about Cornelius the good neighbor. Peter extends kindness regardless of who seeks him. And then Peter learns about the character of Cornelius. Peter learns that Cornelius doesn't fit the stereotype, because, of course, the truth is that most of us do not fit the stereotypes that others hold about us. Such baggage is best left behind. We do not need to keep carrying what many of us learned in the past. We may have learned certain things about people from different cultures and different races and different identities and different economic status, but just because we learned those things, we do not need to keep holding them and carrying them, because in all honesty, those assumptions and stereotypes are almost always untrue.

Peter sets aside any assumptions or stereotypes that he carries. Peter leaves all of that baggage behind. Peter's hands are free to extend in hospitality, which he offers generously. Peter responds to these surprising guests with an open hand and an open mind and an open heart. May we go forth to live the same.

SING #643 We Are All One (in English)

Week 3**IMAGE**

Hands of various skin tones reaching out in hospitality (such as the image of Deacon Diane Kaufmann).

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR **Beyond the Comfortable**

Knock, knock

Who's there?

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit who?

The Holy Spirit who calls us to step through the door and live with our discomfort.

Let's begin today by SINGING . . . in SPANISH.

We will sing it through two times.

SING #643 We Are All One (in Spanish)

How did that feel? *[allow plenty of time for responses]*

We are not inclined to seek experiences where we feel ill equipped or unprepared. Such experiences lead us beyond our comfort zone. We often don't like that, to the point where we may resist trying things that are new or unfamiliar, because in doing so, we may need to ask for help, we may need to depend on others to guide us, we may need to risk being vulnerable, and that makes us feel uncomfortable, and we don't like to feel uncomfortable. We like to be in charge. We like to feel independent. We like to feel in control.

As we have been diving into this story involving Cornelius and Peter, have you noticed how frequently the Holy Spirit has led them into moments

where it is normal and okay to feel uncomfortable? Meeting somebody new, entering an unfamiliar space, navigating cultural differences, feeling like you are the odd one in the room, re-examining long-held assumptions and beliefs. That is precisely where the Holy Spirit leads time after time after time. Whether or not we follow is the big question.

Often our first reaction when we start to feel uncomfortable is to shut down and put a halt to whatever is happening. Imagine if that were how Cornelius and Peter had chosen to respond? Shutting down at the first hint of discomfort? If that had happened, I doubt we would even know their story, because neither of them would have dared to start a relationship with the other.

Thankfully, they both lived with their discomfort, and as our story continues, Peter steps out of his comfort zone to journey to Caesarea where he will enter the house of Cornelius who is of a different race, who is from a different culture and speaks a different language, and who is from a different economic status.

Acts 10:23b-36

The next morning he [Peter] got up and went with them [those sent by Cornelius]. Some of his friends from Joppa went along. A day later they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had his relatives and close friends waiting with him.

The minute Peter came through the door, Cornelius was up on his feet greeting him - and then down on his face worshiping him! Peter pulled him up and said, "None of that - I'm a man and only a man, no different from you."

Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone who had come. Peter addressed them, "You know, I'm sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don't do this - visit and

relax with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. But now I'd like to know why you sent for me."

Cornelius said, "Four days ago at about this time, midafternoon, I was home praying. Suddenly there was a man right in front of me, flooding the room with light. He said, 'Cornelius, your daily prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. I want you to send to Joppa to get Simon, the one they call Peter. He's staying with Simon the Tanner down by the sea.'

"So I did it - I sent for you. And you've been good enough to come. And now we're all here in God's presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us."

Peter fairly exploded with his good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from - if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel - that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again - well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone."

When have you last felt as excited as Peter seems to be? Peter is elated over this new relationship and the new insight he has gained over how expansive and inclusive is the love of God. The Holy Spirit is at work in their lives and in this world, doing new things and bringing new people together, and Peter is overflowing with joy and excitement.

Please note that Peter traveled to a new city for the express purpose of showing up where he had been invited. Peter steps through the door into the home of Cornelius who is of a different race, who is from a different culture with a different language, and who is of a different economic status. Peter shows up. I imagine him taking a deep breath before knocking on the door, bracing for whatever discomfort may come, trusting that the Holy

Spirit has a plan, and then stepping through that door – stepping beyond his comfort zone – ready to listen and to learn.

And let's be very clear: this is brown-skinned Peter from Palestine who comes bearing the good news of Jesus Christ to white-skinned Cornelius from Italy. In all honesty, those of us with white skin come late to this party. For those of us descended from the folks in northern Europe, it will still be centuries before our ancestors will begin to learn the good news of Jesus Christ. Far too often, we who are White have used the Bible as “our story” – meaning White peoples' story, but of course, God's story – like God's love – is for ALL people. In humility, we White people must acknowledge that we joined this story **after** the BROWN people and after the BLACK people. The BROWN and the BLACK people were the ones who brought this good news story to WHITE people. We are sitting in these pews today, because long ago, people with BLACK and BROWN skin invited us and welcomed us and included us.

NOTE: Insert your own story about showing up for a Juneteenth celebration or some other significant event that was new for you. Or introduce the following with words such as, “One pastor describes her experience of showing up in a new and unfamiliar space.”

For years, I had known about Juneteenth celebrations. Celebrating the emancipation proclamation and the freeing of enslaved persons seemed an honorable endeavor, but until recent years, I had never really thought of it as my endeavor. Yes, it's part of US history, but it's not really my history. My ancestors were still in Europe at that time. . . BUT of course, it is my history, because it is an important part of our nation's history, which makes it part of my history. And yes, slavery and emancipation is a big part of history that can stir up a whole lot of feelings of discomfort. And yes, we may feel uncomfortable feeling uncomfortable, but that doesn't give us permission to avoid learning and sharing the truth. History often reveals some unsettling truths, and the only healthy way forward is to recognize and name the sins

of the past. Recall Jesus' words in the Gospel of John about the truth setting us free.

Through the nudging of the Holy Spirit, using the voices of some of my White friends who stressed how important it is for White people to show up, this past summer I did just that. I showed up at the park for a very public celebration to which the entire community had been invited. I showed up for the Juneteenth Celebration in Eau Claire, WI. I showed up to listen and to learn. So did a whole lot of other people - Black people, yes, and also White people and Brown people, all sorts of people learning more about one another and about how our lives are connected one to another. I showed up, and I intend to keep showing up.

There are plenty of other opportunities where we can show up to listen and learn – opportunities to which we are invited like Pride events and Pow Wows and Hmong New Year and so many other public celebrations where we are invited.

Sometimes showing up can be as simple as the words we choose. As we consider the Holy Spirit's call for us to step beyond our comfort zone, consider how frequently in conversation, someone says something racist or tells a sexist joke or makes a really derogatory statement about some group of people who are different in some way. So often, our inclination is to leave those words unchallenged. After all, saying something would only add to the discomfort. . . . and we don't like to feel uncomfortable. . . . BUT we are stronger than that. God is with us. The Holy Spirit is leading us. And as God's people, it is our job to call out and name the harm directed at people regarded by God as beloved. And let us always, always remember that God's love reaches beyond whatever lines we may draw to differentiate us from them. God sees ALL of us as US – the beloved and wonderfully diverse people of God. Giving careful consideration to the words we use with and for one another is an important part of living as God's faithful people and stepping through the door towards the future that God envisions for all of us together.

Week 4

IMAGE Hands of various skin tones clasped together in unity and solidarity

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR Towards Friendship

Knock, knock

Who's there?

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit who?

The Holy Spirit who calls us to step through the door to make new friends.

As Peter puts together all the pieces of what he has seen and heard, the light bulb goes off in Peter's head.

Acts 10:34-48

Peter fairly exploded with his good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from - if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel - that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again - well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.

"You know the story of what happened in Judea. It began in Galilee after John preached a total life-change. Then Jesus arrived from Nazareth, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, ready for action. He went through the country helping people and healing everyone who was beaten down by the Devil. He was able to do all this because God was with him.

"And we saw it, saw it all, everything he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem where they killed him, hung him from a cross. But in three days God had him up, alive, and out where he could be seen. Not everyone saw him - he wasn't put on public display. Witnesses had been carefully handpicked by God beforehand - us! We were the ones, there to eat and drink with him after he came back from the dead. He commissioned us to announce this in public, to bear solemn witness that he is in fact the One whom God destined as Judge of the living and dead. But we're not alone in this. Our witness that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the witness of all the prophets."

No sooner were these words out of Peter's mouth than the Holy Spirit came on the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on "outsider" Gentiles, but there it was - they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God.

Then Peter said, "Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did." Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days.

SING #643 We Are All One (first in English and then in Spanish)

Let's be very, very clear. All of this joy and celebrating, all of this wonderful new insight came because Peter was willing to leave the safety and security of his familiar space. Peter ventured out to enter the home of Cornelius. Peter ventured out to meet new and different people – different in race, culture, and economic status.

Peter prayed. Peter listened to God, even when it took him a while to figure out what God was asking of him. Peter followed where the Holy Spirit led, and Peter willingly entered unfamiliar space to meet and engage with new people. Peter left the security of his home to venture into the home of Cornelius. Peter did not expect Cornelius to come to him. Peter willingly went to Cornelius.

So often at church, we operate with the motto, “If we build it, they will come.” And so here we sit in our church buildings, waiting for people to find us and come to us. And maybe we lament, as we wonder, why the new families, the new neighbors don’t step through our doors.

The ELCA is the whitest denomination in the US – nothing to be proud of. And we, in the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, are the whitest of the 65 synods within this whitest denomination. For years, for decades, people of color have NOT been coming to us. Do we have any idea why? Do we care? What might we learn if we leave our safe, comfortable places to visit their spaces? What might we learn if we show up to listen and to ask questions and then truly listen to the responses?

And if you are thinking, “Where would I go? There aren’t any people of color around here?” Look again. They are here . . . all around us . . . but they may not feel welcome in the same community spaces where we feel welcome, and they may choose to shop at what we consider “odd” times when the stores are less busy, and they may work in an environment very different from where we work, and even if they live in our neighborhoods they may not feel safe venturing out when everybody else is out. Why might that be?

NOTE: Insert your own story about when your eyes were opened to the reality of how unsafe others may feel simply because of their skin color. Or introduce the following with words such as, “One pastor describes this surprising and unsettling experience.”

In all of my adult life, until I moved to Wisconsin 6 years ago, I had never actually heard somebody scream the N word at another person. This happened several blocks from my home at a busy downtown intersection. I was flabbergasted. The tone of voice was so incredibly filled with loathing and hatred. I was shaken.

If I were a person of color, would I choose to keep a low profile? How many positive interactions does it take to counteract one hateful, hurtful interaction such as the one I witnessed? And what can I as a White person do to increase the frequency of those positive interactions?

Last week we talked about how important it is to show up to share in significant events hosted by people who may seem different from us. Peter showed up where he was invited – the house of Cornelius. Will we show up, especially when the invitation is extended to the whole community? Will we show up to listen and learn at a Juneteenth celebration or a Pow Wow or for Hmong New Year or for a Pride event or parade? What about cultural arts events or special museum exhibits? Are we willing to show up and step through the door?

By the end of today's reading, Peter is bursting with excitement over how the Holy Spirit has brought these surprising new relationships. Peter delights in calling Cornelius and the others "FRIENDS". These are more than just new people, these are more than just new members, these are more than just new givers to support the church budget, these people are FRIENDS. And these new friends are different and diverse in a multitude of ways that bring blessing and joy to the larger community.

NOTE: Insert your own story about using language to remind one other of our mission to welcome and include. Or introduce the following with words such as, "One pastor describes a small and important step towards embracing diversity."

To my delight, the congregation I serve has embraced an important phrase that we use whenever we celebrate Holy Communion. The invitation to the communion table ends with me saying, "These are

the gifts of God for the people of God, and (the congregation responds enthusiastically)
ALL ARE WELCOME!

Those words are wonderful, and those words are a great start, for we also know that actions speak so much louder than words. How will our actions communicate welcome and inclusion to others? And how will we do that without waiting for people to come to us but rather by going out into the world to engage with people wherever we may encounter new people? How will our actions outside of and beyond the walls of our congregation convey the love of God?

And how will we do that again and again and again? This is absolutely NOT about “one and done” – check that on our “to do” list. For many of us, this is a whole new way of living. This is a whole new way of engaging and interacting and listening and learning and growing more fully into the people God created us to be.

God cherishes us just as we are. And God invites – and even more than that – God expects us to cherish and respect and honor one another just as we are. . . . in all of our glorious and wonderful diversity.

Week 5**IMAGE**

One or more symbols for groups working for justice. For example: Black Lives Matter or Me, Too, or RIC or others in your context

STEPPING THROUGH THE DOOR to **Embrace a New Reality**

Knock, knock

Who's there?

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit who?

The Holy Spirit who calls us to step through the door to embrace a new reality.

Acts 10:47-11:18

Then Peter said, "Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did."

Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Then they asked Peter to stay on for a few days.

The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it - heard that the non-Jewish "outsiders" were now "in." When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet:

"What do you think you're doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?"

So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step: "Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance and saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven and settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds - you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in.

"Then I heard a voice: 'Go to it, Peter - kill and eat.' I said, 'Oh, no, Master. I've never so much as tasted food that wasn't kosher.' The voice spoke again: 'If God says it's okay, it's okay.' This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

"Just then three men showed up at the house where I was staying, sent from Caesarea to get me. The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying, 'Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He'll tell you something that will save your life - in fact, you and everyone you care for.'

"So I started in, talking. Before I'd spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as he did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus' words: 'John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?"

Hearing it all laid out like that, they quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. "It's really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!"

SING #643 We Are All One (first in English and then in Spanish)

The Holy Spirit has been at work in some exciting ways! Peter has learned so much. Through prayer, Peter has listened and learned how to let go of some old and unhelpful baggage. With a gentle push from the Holy Spirit, Peter has dared to venture into discomfort, stepping through the door, reaching out beyond the familiar and the comfortable. And in doing so, Peter has been changed. Peter has made a new friend in Cornelius. In fact, Peter refers to many new friends, and Peter is ecstatic.

Peter rejoices how his vision has expanded, for Peter has learned to recognize the glorious expansiveness of God's love and the wonderful inclusiveness of God's vision for life in this world. Peter is riding high after all that has happened and after all that he has learned and experienced, and then Peter returns to Jerusalem where he encounters . . . PUSH BACK.

WHAT . . . DO . . . YOU . . . THINK . . . YOU ARE DOING, PETER?!!!

Horror of horrors, Peter has been rubbing shoulders with THAT crowd. It's obvious that, from their perspective, Peter has been spending time with the WRONG people, as if there really are right or wrong people to spend time with. Peter's friends in Jerusalem come down hard on him for making these new friends. The folks in Jerusalem are content with what has been – with their past and present reality. Peter, however, has caught a BIG glimpse of a very different future.

The easy thing for Peter to do would be to give in, to avoid the uncomfortable, to return to the ways of the past. Thankfully, that is NOT how Peter chooses to respond. Peter stands firm and holds fast and offers a detailed, step-by-step explanation for the change they now see in him and in Peter's vision for their life together. The fact that the author of Acts chooses to give us Peter's speech to them – which basically tells us, the readers, what we already know – the fact that these words are included emphasizes all the more how important are these lessons that Peter – and hopefully we – have learned.

Remember how we began this series? With this charge at the beginning of the book of Acts.

*You will be my witnesses
in Jerusalem,
in all Judea
and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.*

NOTE: As in Week 1, use an expandable ball or gesture with hands to show movement out from the center, reaching out farther and farther with each new place name.

This is what the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ looks like.

Gesture with ball or hands once again, moving from the center out.

BROWN people
BLACK people
WHITE people

Jesus spent his time with all sorts of different people. Jesus – who surely had brown skin – did not treat anybody differently because of the color of that person’s skin. And now, in this book of Acts, we learn how Peter and the rest of the disciples – also likely people with brown skin – are witnessing the expansiveness of God’s love for ALL people in all of our wonderful diversity.

An Ethiopian traveler – with Black skin from Africa – learned of God’s expansive and inclusive love in chapter 8 of the Book of Acts. And over these past weeks, we have been introduced in Acts chapters 10 and 11 to Cornelius from Italy which means that he very likely had WHITE skin. Though there were certainly times in this country when those from Italy were not considered WHITE. That is yet one more of those unsettling truths from our nation’s history.

Through Peter's detailed accounting of his transformation, Peter invites his friends in Jerusalem to recognize how this change came through the nudging of the Holy Spirit for both Peter and Cornelius to start on this journey by taking one new step. Each step in this story leads from one opportunity to another opportunity, from one invitation to another invitation, from the opening of one door to the opening of another door and then another door until Peter and Cornelius regard one another as friends, as siblings together in the one body of Christ.

This story ends where it began – listening to God. When Peter and Cornelius both listened to God, they were surprised. They were also confused and puzzled. They did not understand, and yet they continued to follow. They continued to trust that God was leading them towards the future that God envisioned. And what both Peter and Cornelius discovered is that God's vision reaches beyond what has been in order to lead them and us towards the future that could be – that needs to be – the future that embodies the expansive and inclusive love of God for all people in all of our wonderful diversity.

And YES, diversity is wonderful.

And YES, diversity is a blessing woven throughout all of creation.

And YES, diversity is something to celebrate and to embrace.

Such has been and will continue to be God's vision for our life together.

SING #538 The Lord Now Sends Us Forth