

NOW, I UNDERSTAND
Pentecost Journeys
July 22, 2007

TEXT

Acts 10: 1-35

A HOLLYWOOD ENDING

I was channel surfing when I saw the ending of a rather interesting film about an African-American deep-sea navy diver. Somewhere in the story, this diver had a leg amputated resulting in the end of his navy career.

This diver felt he could continue his navy career so he applied to be reinstated into active duty. This request found him in a navy courtroom before the presiding judge who, as it were, wrote the rules that disqualified the diver. The diver had to pass a test by taking twelve steps in a full deep diving suit.

He passes the test and is reinstated. The final scene shows his family and friends celebrating his victory. Interestingly enough, the film takes a quick look at the judge who sits back in his chair pondering a new reality that disabled; minority personal could still serve in the navy.

Sure, the film is about the African-American hero who overcomes many obstacles to achieve his goal. It is also about the navy command that examined their official policy and had the courage to make a change.

This theme was played out centuries ago and is recorded in the book of Acts.

CORNELIUS & PETER

Cornelius was a Roman Centurion, so he had a degree of power. However, from a Jewish perspective, Cornelius was not acceptable to God.

Even though Cornelius was not a Jew, he was a devote man in search of God. God came to Cornelius through an angel in a vision. The angel told Cornelius to send some men to Joppa and to seek our Simon, also called Peter.

Meanwhile, Peter is on the roof praying. He is hungry and waits for the next meal to be prepared. God works through Peter's hunger. Peter, like Cornelius saw a vision of animals the Jews designated as unclean to eat. A voice tells Peter to get and kill some of the animals and to prepare a meal.

Peter resists stating he has never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice then says, "What God had made, you shall not profane. This vision appeared three times. Peter had no idea what the vision was about. He was still thinking about the vision when the Spirit said, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now, get up, go down and go with them."

He didn't have much time to give the vision anymore thought because the men Cornelius sent had arrived were shouting for Peter. The men tell Peter about Cornelius being directed by an angel to send for Peter.

Peter goes to the home of Cornelius where he is greeted by a group of family and friends that Cornelius had invited. At this point the story comes to its final, dramatic scene just as in the movie.

NOW I UNDERSTAND

At this point, Peter is obedient to the voice he heard. He was, however, probably confused. He was a Jew, believed in the Jewish traditions, and felt only Jews were acceptable in the sight of God. Then why is God (the voice) telling him to go to the home of a centurion?

He arrives at the home of Cornelius. Cornelius fell on his feet worshipping Peter. Peter probably found this rather strange. He tells Cornelius to get up and stop worshipping him (Peter) because Peter is only a mortal.

Peter goes into the home of Cornelius. The first thing he says is, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile. This proves that Peter really hasn't totally discovered where God is leading him.

Peter continues with a statement that today would probably spark a confrontation should a Jewish person call a non-Jew unclean or profane. Clearly, Peter would not graduate at the head of the class if he were enrolled in Tact School.

He continues his disdain for these non-Jewish people by saying in a very abrupt way, I might add, "Now may I ask, why did you send for me?" At this point, Cornelius begins to tell his side of this story and how an angel appeared to him and told him to send some men to Joppa to seek out Peter.

Then Cornelius says his family and friends are gathered to hear what the Lord has commanded Peter to say. What follows are the most important words, in scripture, second only to the words announcing Jesus' birth and his resurrection.

At this point, Peter is like the judge in the movie who, through a series of events, re-evaluates his position that physically challenged minorities have no

place in the navy. In the light of the events that Cornelius describes and in light of what Peter he has experienced, Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fear (respects) him and does what is right, is acceptable to him."

The first part of Acts, especially chapters 9-12, concentrates on the life of Peter. He continued to be a conservative Jew but understood God's plan of outreach to the Gentiles. Beginning with chapter 13, the rest of the book of Acts is almost exclusively about Paul, and the ministry to the Gentiles.

OUR MISSION

At the last Synod Assembly, the Bishop made an interesting statement in regards the struggles so many congregation face. He said, "Our culture has abandoned us!" I've thought about that.

Sure, culture is not as faith orientated as perhaps it was in the past. Yes, people today have many commitments and a lot of options regarding where they spend their time, and their money for that matter.

You know what? The Gentile culture at the beginning of Christian mission is the same as our culture today. You might argue this point and you have a right to do so. I challenge you to think about this.

The culture back then is like our culture today in that the Gentiles were under no obligation to God. They did not have the laws the Jews were famous for. They were not mandated to go to worship or to live in relationship with God. So the playing field is level, as the old saying goes.

So, maybe the reality is, maybe we have abandoned our culture by not seeing a greater vision. The judge in the movie, and Peter in the story for this morning, needed to rethink the narrowness of their vision and what prevented them from seeing a greater vision. The same is true for us today.