

One Giant Leap for Mankind

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

Acts 10:21-35



²¹And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?” ²²And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” ²³So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” ²⁷And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful

it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.” ³⁰And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³²Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ ³³So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” ³⁴So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

When Neil Armstrong first landed on the moon, he said, “One small step for man; One giant leap for mankind.” We see something similar happening in the Christian Church. The Christian Church and its foundation can be summarized as follows: There were decisive steps that started out small but ultimately became a giant leap for all humanity. The first step was the resurrection of Jesus. Since the resurrection of Jesus, we see the ever-growing waves reaching to the ends of the earth. The next step was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem and Judea. After that, the message of the gospel spread to Samaria. Finally, the gospel reached all people. At each of these events, there was a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit: In Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples; In Samaria, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Samaritans (see Acts chapter 8); And finally, in our passage, the Gentiles were included in our Church also, thereby opening the gospel to all the people of the world. The disciples of Jesus did not come up with all of this themselves. Jesus Himself specified this sequence in His proclamation commissioning them, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We learn from today’s text that the opening of the gospel was a huge leap. This leap was difficult not only for the Gentile Cornelius, but especially for Peter. The Holy Spirit therefore had to teach Peter: The Holy Spirit sent Peter a vision in which he saw

nothing but unclean animals. Peter was truly disgusted by this. He wasn't disgusted because he was a vegetarian and hated meat, nor because he saw nothing but bugs and other disgusting animals. No, he was disgusted by the animals he saw because they were unclean according to Jewish law. No Jew was allowed to eat them, and it says that Peter was deeply disturbed by this vision. For Peter, this was much more than just culture shock! Yet, he understood the vision when Cornelius' messengers arrived. That was when Peter first crossed a line which would otherwise have been unthinkable to cross. He allowed these Gentiles into a Jewish house, and likely even ate with them, even though both were forbidden according to Jewish law and custom. The next step came immediately afterwards. Now it was Peter's turn to go into Cornelius' house. Cornelius also had to take a giant leap to join the Christian community. Initially, he worshipped Peter as if Peter himself were a god (a practice which was likely the custom for Greeks). Peter strongly objected to this, and at the same time began to spread the word of the gospel. Thus, Cornelius and his entire household were able to hear the message of Christ for the first time. That is why we are here today. Imagine if Peter had said to Cornelius' messenger, "You are Gentiles; I am not responsible for you!" No, Peter did not react that way. Even though it was against his upbringing and his entire understanding of God's law, he took that giant leap. He did it because God Himself had guided him.

That is why we are gathered here today as a Christian community, even though none of us are Jewish. Yet we too must repeatedly take giant leaps so that God's word is proclaimed and passed on to others. We don't just pass on our culture or our habits. The Church must always return to where it began, namely the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus we find our origin, our source, and our strength. However, because we are still human our culture is like a second skin to us. This second skin can constantly lead to divisions that we must overcome.

Here is a little story from our time:

Mary stood on a Greek beach with a group of immigrants who were soaked and frozen. They had just completed a dangerous journey and were relieved to finally have solid ground under their feet again. But then Mary saw something that completely threw her off balance again: A group of people stood in front of her. Some were scantily clad, and others were completely naked. Mary and her group stood facing the other group. It was as if both groups had suddenly landed on another planet. No one knew what to do with the other. Mary would later say, "It was then I knew I was in a foreign country." Mary had to deal with this feeling of being a stranger again and again. Mary was not raised in a strict Muslim household, but nevertheless she knew that as a Muslim woman she would not touch pork and would always wear a head covering. She had to explain these peculiarities constantly at work or school. Every time she did, she felt like a stranger. But Mary was about to cross another boundary. The step she would take was much bigger than Neil Armstrong's when he landed on the moon, and the boundary-crossing would have been more internal than his. Through a friend, she had received a Bible in her own language. For the first time in her life, she experienced something like an inner calling. She simply had to learn more about the Christian God! She had a very real feeling that Jesus Christ Himself was inviting her to Himself again and again. But Mary couldn't go to church! She was a Muslim and thought that if you went to church you also had to eat pork, and she could never do that! Eventually, however, she gathered her courage to go to church. It was there she finally felt safe and prayed to Jesus Christ for the very first time in her life. It warmed her heart, and she felt that Christ knew her as intimately as if He were a member of her own family. "but I can't become a Christian!" she thought afterwards. She explained everything to the pastor: "I am a Muslim and cannot eat pork. That's why I can't possibly become a Christian." The pastor was very

understanding and suggested to her, “We know that you are a Muslim, and we also know that you can’t eat pork because of that. But if Christ still speaks to you and you speak to Him, you are welcome to continue doing so even as a Muslim.” Mary was very surprised by the pastor’s answer, but she also felt liberated. From that time on, she prayed to Christ not only once, but repeatedly. Later, she was even baptized and truly became a Christian. But did she remain a Muslim in any sense? Today, Mary can talk about it freely. She says, “Back when I took my first steps in Greece, I was shocked and felt lost, but when I took the first steps towards Christianity it didn’t feel foreign to me. On the contrary, that’s when I really came home!” Maria still doesn’t eat pork, and she wears a head covering when she goes out in public. Yet, she is truly a Christian at heart.

When Peter went into the home of Cornelius, we see that it must have been a huge inner leap for him. Likewise for Cornelius, to now be in a church and part of the body of Christ. We know from the epistle to the Galatians that Peter continued to struggle with this issue afterwards. He had to repeatedly be taught that this was God’s will and that the most important things should be kept at the center. Other things which were unimportant could quietly be set aside. The most crucial point of the story of Cornelius is that the gospel was preached and Cornelius was baptized. The crucial point for Mary and the many other people who come to us is also the preaching of Jesus Christ and baptism. Certainly, there are many cultural and linguistic differences that can continue to be a challenge. But this is precisely where we are called, just as Peter and Cornelius were: To cross boundaries for the sake of the gospel. Thank God that happened to Peter and thank God the same thing still happens today! Faith in Jesus Christ breaks down all barriers. Peter tells Cornelius as clearly as he himself had experienced it in his own life: “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Shouldn’t we have the same experience nowadays as Peter did, time and again? Namely, bringing in strangers close to us for fellowship in Christ. People from all nations come together and worship Christ! People from very different cultures drink from one cup and share in the body of Christ. What happened in Cornelius’ house was a cross-cultural and cross-national revolution that influenced the whole world so that we could benefit from it today. This revolution is still taking place, because God does not look at the outward appearance! Amen.