

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, on the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

Stretching Exercises

(Acts 10:1--11:18)

Study #12

Introduction: (In)Flexibility...

I am “flexibility challenged.” My joints are VERY un-limber.

I’m envious of people who can sit cross-legged on the floor or who can touch their fingertips to the floor while their legs are straight. I can’t do either of these things.

With some of the exercises I do these days, I’ve gained some flexibility. And, I sometimes pull out torture tools like a foam roller or a lacrosse ball to “release” muscle and fascia tissue. But, I’m still really tight.

Since I believe that in some ways the body is a picture of the soul, this tendency toward inflexibility is a warning signal.

There was a time, years ago, when I remarked to Kathy - and I was NOT talking about my physical life - *“I’m a pretty flexible guy.”*

As I remember, she was drinking something at the time, because she almost choked. She didn’t share my self-assessment of being a pretty easy-going, adaptable, flexible person.

I took her response to heart and have made it my aim to be more flexible, more open to change.
(You could ask her if I’ve made any progress...)

It is obvious that flexibility and range of motion are important issues for the body. Flexibility is even more important for the soul.

And to be flexible, open and receptive to change is critical for each of us in our journey with God because He will reliably stretch us.

Be warned! When you walk with God, you’re walking with Someone who will stretch you to the max. And He will stretch you because it is only by stretching - sometimes painful stretching - that change comes.

If we don’t nurture flexibility and learn to embrace change, the great adventure of walking with God will be way more uncomfortable than it needs to be.

This morning, we get to watch God stretch the early church and the early Christians. Today, the operative words are: Stretch. Flexibility. Change.

Background: Two miracles and an oddity

When we turn to Acts, chapter 10, we have passed the scene of Saul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

After Saul became a believer in Jesus, he was courageously welcomed into the church, first in Damascus and then in Jerusalem. And then, due to an attempt on his life in Jerusalem, the church sent Saul away to safety in his hometown of Tarsus.

Luke concludes Acts 9 with two miracles, both performed by the Apostle Peter.¹

Those two miracles were followed by an oddity.

The second miracle - raising a young girl from the dead! - took place in the town of Joppa. Peter was invited to stay for a few days in Joppa in the home of Simon, a man who was, by profession, a tanner. *Simon Peter at the home of Simon, the [unclean] tanner...*

¹ First, Peter healed a man named Aeneas, who had been bed-ridden for eight years in the city of Lydda. And then, he traveled the short distance from Lydda to the coastal town of Joppa where he raised from the dead a young girl named Tabitha.

People who made their living tanning hides and working with leather were considered by the Jews of Peter's day to be *unclean* because they were always working around dead animals.

There was no biblical command about this, but orthodox Jews - like Peter - would NOT stay in the home of a tanner. But Peter agreed to stay there. Peter has stretched. He's become more flexible in his associations as he has matured in Jesus.

He's limbered up to the point of staying in the home of a tanner, and that developing flexibility is about to come in real handy.

While Peter is in Joppa, Luke turns our attention to another city - Caesarea - also located on the coast, about thirty miles north of Joppa.

Salvation in Jesus - For the Gentiles!! (10:1-48)

Two Visions (10:1-16)

Cornelius' vision from God (10:1-8)

Meet Cornelius! (vv. 1-2)

In this city lived a certain Roman centurion.²

Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. They understood loyalty and were famous for their courage. Wherever a centurion is mentioned in the New Testament, he is described in positive terms.³

The centurion we're about to meet is named Cornelius.

[Acts 10:1] Now⁴ there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort,⁵ [2] a

² Caesarea (named for Caesar Augustus) was a beautiful city, boasting a great harbor and a very diverse population.

³ The historian Polybius wrote, "Centurions are not required to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at their post."

⁴ The events recorded here may have occurred 7-8 years after the death of Jesus.

devout man and one who feared God⁶ with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually.

Of course, Cornelius was a Gentile, a non-Jew. But, he was a great friend to the Jews and he had a great reverence for the Jews' God.

One day, during afternoon prayer, out of the blue, an angel appeared to him.

Cornelius' vision (vv. 3-6)

[3] About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in to him, and said to him, "Cornelius!" [4] And fixing his gaze upon him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. [5] Now dispatch some men to Joppa, and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; [6] he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea."

The message doesn't tell Cornelius the purpose or the outcome of the mission. But, he's a centurion. He knows how to give AND how to take orders.

So, he instantly obeyed the angel and sent three men to Joppa to meet Simon Peter, who was staying in the home of Simon, that *unclean* tanner.

Peter's vision from God (The Vision of the Sheet) (10:9-16)⁷

Peter, at prayer (vv. 9-10)

⁵ The first Gentile Jesus encountered in His ministry was a centurion. (Matthew 8). The Italian Cohort, to which Cornelius was attached, was originally located in Rome. Auxiliary units (like Cornelius' in Caesarea) were kept up to strength after their formation by local recruitment.

⁶ A "God-fearer" was a Gentile who attended the synagogue and honored Jewish law and custom, but was not proselytized (i.e. - was not circumcised).

⁷ Peter took the lead in the beginning, fulfilling the word of Jesus that he would be the one who held the keys to the Kingdom. (Matthew 16) Peter unlocked the gate to the Jews, to the Samaritans, and, here, to the Gentiles.

Let's call it a two-day's journey from Caesarea to Joppa. So, if the angel appeared to Cornelius on Day One, his servants probably left for Joppa early on Day Two and arrived in Joppa on Day Three.

In the middle of Day Three, before Cornelius' servants arrived, Peter was up on the flat roof of Simon's house, praying.⁸ It's lunchtime. People inside were preparing the mid-day meal and Peter was hungry.

At this exact time, Peter **[10] fell into a trance**⁹ and God gave him a vision (a vision sure to capture the imagination of a hungry man).

This is what I'll refer to today as THE VISION OF THE SHEET.

Peter's vision (THE VISION OF THE SHEET) (vv. 11-16)

[10:11] and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, [12] and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air.

The animals described here are termed *unclean* in the Old Testament. God had laid out specific dietary laws for His people that included prohibitions. They couldn't eat things like pork and shellfish, certain birds and insects.

While in this trance, Peter heard a voice tell him, **[13]... "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!"**

Peter knew this was wrong. This voice was telling him to violate Moses' Law and centuries of Jewish tradition. Thinking that God was testing him,¹⁰ he refused the command.

[14] But Peter said, "By no means,¹¹ Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean."

Peter got this immediate response: **[15] Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."**

That's THE VISION OF THE SHEET. The vision repeated three times. Three lowering of the sheet. Three commands to **"kill and eat"** Three times, **"What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."**

The vision left Peter scratching his head, wondering what in the world THAT was all about. While scratching his head, he heard voices at Simon's gate, calling out for **[18]... "Simon, who is called Peter."**

Two Meetings (10:19-29)

At Simon's home (10:19-23)

The Holy Spirit spoke to Peter (10:19-20)

[19] While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. [20] But get up, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings; for I have sent them Myself."

You've picked up that there has been a lot of God's behind-the-scenes activity going on here.

He prepared Cornelius to meet Peter. He prepared Simon with a vision and a command to go with the delegation from Cornelius - and God's active involvement continues throughout this whole episode.

Peter came down off the roof, told the men that he was the one they were looking for, and asked them why they wanted to see him.

⁸ The flat roof of a house provided privacy, so Jews often went there for prayer.

⁹ Consciousness was at least partially suspended, but we don't know all that might be implied by this message that Peter was in a "trance."

¹⁰ After having failed one test rather spectacularly (remember the three denials before the servant girl in the courtyard on the night of Jesus' trials), he wanted to make sure that he passed THIS test.

¹¹ Remember other times when Peter refused God's command, each time to do what he thought was the right thing. In Matthew 16:23, He tried to tell Jesus that He would never die, to which Jesus responded, **"Get behind Me, Satan!"** Then, in John 13:8, Peter told Jesus that he didn't want Him, the Master, washing His feet, to which Jesus replied, **"If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."**

Cornelius' messengers meet Peter (10:21-23)

[22] They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well-spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you."

Peter had been confused after the vision of the sheet and the animals. Now, with the arrival of the men from Cornelius, he is intrigued. And, of course, after hearing about the angel's message, he agreed to go back with them to Caesarea to meet with Cornelius.

That night, before they left for the two-day journey, Cornelius' delegation - all of them Gentiles - spent the night with the Apostle Peter in the home of the unclean tanner, Simon.

That's quite a diverse crew under one roof. It tells us that barriers are coming down. We can sense Peter stretching, improving his range of relational motion. He's getting more flexible.

The next morning - Day Four of this drama - Cornelius' servants, plus Peter - and six men who traveled with him - all left to go to Caesarea. (vv. 23b-24)

They arrived on Day Five and made their way to a packed house, because Cornelius ***[24b]...had called together his relatives and close friends.***¹²

Cornelius wanted everybody to hear what the angel wanted Simon Peter to tell him. The first words are more remarkable than you might realize.

At Cornelius' home (10:25-29)

In the home of a Gentile (v. 25a)

[25a] When Peter entered...

¹² Cornelius had been confident (or, at least hopeful) that Peter would come to him.

Peter, a Jew, entered the home of a Gentile. There was nothing in the Bible that would have prevented him from entering the house of a Gentile. But 1st century Jewish rules of engagement would never have allowed it.¹³ It was taboo.

But here is Peter, walking right into the home of a Gentile, and thumbing his nose at his own culture's tradition. Why did he feel so free to walk through that door, ignore that taboo? Because he "got" the message of THE VISION OF THE SHEET.

That vision dealt explicitly with clean and unclean animals. The essential lesson from the vision was, *"There are now no clean and unclean animals. You can eat whatever you want to eat."*¹⁴

But Peter (rightly!) applied THE VISION OF THE SHEET to people. God doesn't divide people into categories of clean and unclean. So, it's OK for Peter to enter the home of a Gentile.

A VERY respectful greeting (v. 25b)

As he walked in, ***[25b]... Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet¹⁵ and worshiped him.***¹⁶ - which speaks volumes about how hungry Cornelius was for whatever message he would hear from Peter.

Peter raised Cornelius up off the floor and then gave the kind of address sure to whet any audience's appetite.

Peter's (awkward) opening remarks (vv. 28-29)

¹³ Among other things, interaction with Gentiles was considered risky business because their handling of food was not "kosher." If a Jew came in contact with non-kosher items, he would be rendered ceremonially unclean. At this point, Peter was no longer concerned with such things.

¹⁴ See Mark 7:14-19 where Jesus previews what is happening here in Acts 10. See also 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

¹⁵ Crazy. A soldier in the army of the occupying nation falls down in reverence at the feet of a citizen of the subordinate nation.

¹⁶ Worshiped - perhaps too strong. Surely, though, intense honor was intended.

To set the stage, imagine we that invite a guest to speak here at Northwest on a Sunday morning. We're eager to hear what he has to say, and he begins:

"You surely understand what a challenge it was for me to accept the invitation to speak to you people. You know that people like me don't usually speak to people like you..."

You'd be offended by that introduction, right? It reveals bigotry. So, listen to Peter's opening remarks to the group gathered in Cornelius' home.

[28] And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. [29a] That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for."

The Jews *correctly* believed that they were God's chosen people. They *incorrectly* concluded that they should avoid contact with non-Jews.¹⁷

They understood that God had a special plan for them. They missed that His plan was that they would be the channel of His blessing to the whole world of non-Jews.

But, THE VISION OF THE SHEET has cleared all of that up for Peter. He considers no one unclean. He can hang with anybody, can go into anyone's home.

So, he turned to Cornelius, **[29b] "So I ask for what reason you have sent for me."**

Cornelius proceeded to tell Peter about the message the angel had given him, four days previous. *"Peter, the angel told me to fetch you from Joppa."* (vv. 30-32)

Two Messages (vv. 30-43)

¹⁷ Historically, close contact with Gentiles had led the Jews into idolatry and other sins. So, while business relations were sometimes necessary, social contacts were frowned upon because the Jews wanted to remain "uncontaminated."

Cornelius' warm invitation (10:30-33)

[33] "So I sent to you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

And with that, Peter gets it. He "gets" that this whole trip to Caesarea has been orchestrated by God so that he could share the Good News of Jesus with these Gentiles.

Peter's (interrupted) sermon (10:34-43)

No partiality with God (10:34-35)

[34] Opening his mouth, Peter said: 'I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, [35] but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.'

That one comment - **"God is not one to show partiality"** - was revolutionary.

If you look through the Old Testament, you'll find examples of non-Jews in relationship to God. Lots of them. But no first-century Jew would have said, *"God makes no distinction between Jew and non-Jew."*

There was the greatest distinction possible in the days of Peter and Cornelius between Jews and non-Jews.

Here in America, we find ourselves in a season of social fracture with lots of distinctions between different groups. Thick lines are drawn between political classes. There is gender tension, racial tension, economic tension.

As thick as the lines are that divide us in America, the line separating Jews and Gentiles was far thicker. Peter swept away centuries of prejudice when he said, *"God doesn't play favorites."*

And, given God heart for all people everywhere, Peter told the people in Cornelius' home all about Jesus.

No one like Jesus (10:36-41)

[36] "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all¹⁸)-- [37] you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. [38] You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit¹⁹ and with power, and how He went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil; for God was with Him. [39] We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. [40] God raised Him up on the third day, and granted that He become visible, [41] not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead."

That reading took about one minute. But Luke is just hitting the highlights.

During the message, I'll bet Peter told stories about Jesus. He shared Gospel truth. Cornelius and his friends needed to hear of the saving work of Jesus, and Peter told them about it all.

Now he's rounding third base, heading for home. He is just about to press for a decision.

Salvation in no one else!! (10:42-43)

[42] "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. [43] Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

¹⁸ Lord of all = Jews and Gentiles.

¹⁹ See Isaiah 61:1-2 for the Messiah being anointed by the Holy Spirit.

Peter's preparing to give an invitation. But before he got the chance, the Holy Spirit moved and the people responded.

Two - No THREE! - Pentecosts! (10:44-48)

Welcome to Jesus, Gentiles! (10:44-46a)

[44] While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. [45] And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also.²⁰ [46] For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.²¹"

The Holy Spirit knows faith when He sees it, and He fell on these full-blooded Gentiles who believed, just as He had on the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and just as He had, more recently, on the Samaritans. (Acts 8)

Minus a couple of details (the sound of a mighty, rushing wind and the appearance of tongues as of fire resting on each one of them), this is a replay of the Day of Pentecost.

Peter saw the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and said, ***[47] "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?"***

He gave orders that they be baptized. They were baptized.

And now, biblically speaking, the dividing wall has come down between the two major groups of humanity. Jews and Gentiles are one in the body of Christ, the church. How awesome was this!!

Shortly after the baptisms, these new believers approached the still-very-Jewish Apostle Peter and made sort of a silly request.

Welcome to Cornelius' home, Peter! (10:48b)

²⁰ This testifies to the acceptability of Gentiles on the basis of faith alone (which anticipated the decision of the Jerusalem Council, chapter 15).

²¹ Speaking with tongues was irrefutable evidence to Peter and his companions that the Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles as He had been on them at Pentecost.

[48b]...Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Imagine that.

Gentiles, maybe Cornelius, ask a Jew to stay in his home. I mean, Peter might stay in the home of that unclean, Jewish tanner in Joppa; and he might welcome Gentiles into the church, but stay in the home of a Gentile? I don't think so

But Peter said, "YES!" Simon Peter has gotten VERY flexible. He did stay with Cornelius and his family for a few days in Caesarea.

And what did Peter eat while he was in their home? Anything he wanted to eat. Pork rinds, baked ham, and bacon/lettuce/tomato sandwiches, oysters on the half shell, squid. You name it.

And how was it that he considered himself free to stay in Cornelius' house AND enjoy these non-kosher foods? Because he "got" the message of THE VISION OF THE SHEET.

God shows no partiality. So, Peter need show no partiality, either.²²

After a few days of great fellowship with his new Gentile family in Jesus, it was time for Peter to leave Caesarea and head back home to Jerusalem.

As he pulled into town, he ran into a flexibility challenge.

Acceptance in Jesus - For the Gentiles?? (11:1-18)

Peter is Called on the Carpet (11:1-3)

News travels fast about Gentile salvation (v. 1)

²² Prior to resolving this issue, Christianity was perilously close to simply being another Jewish sect. The issue will be more formally addressed in Acts 15 (a VERY important passage), but as of Acts 10-11, the church is established as a separate entity, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

[11:1] Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Gentiles believe in Jesus! Gentiles are saved! Everybody rejoiced. This is wonderful.

But, the news of what Peter had done *after* the Gentiles' conversion and baptism also reached Jerusalem.

News travels fast about Peter's behavior (vv. 2-3)

[2] And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, [3] saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."²³

Whatever joy there had been at the salvation of the Gentiles was overshadowed by hard feelings about Peter violating kosher, eating unclean food with these unclean people.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem weren't unhappy with Peter because he *evangelized* Gentiles. They were unhappy because he *socialized* with them.

They had no trouble believing that *God* would treat Jews and Gentiles the same. They just couldn't believe that God would expect *them* to treat Gentiles and Jews the same.

So, what did Peter do? He patiently allowed his buddies to travel the same path he had traveled to get comfortable hanging with the Gentiles.

Peter Opens the Critics' Eyes (11:4-17)

- The Vision of the Sheet (take two) (11:4-10)

"I was praying on the roof of Simon's house in Joppa when I saw a vision of a sheet being lowered from the sky. It had unclean animals on it. A voice commanded, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." I refused, of course.

²³ Nothing is said in chapter 10 about Peter eating with Gentiles, but it is implied.

But, then a voice told me, **“What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”**

“This whole thing happened three times - and then the sheet was drawn back up into the sky. At that very moment, three visitors from Cornelius came to see me in Joppa.”

- ...followed by VISITORS... (11:11-12)

“They told me an angel had sent them to invite me to travel with them to speak with Cornelius. So, I went with these men on the two-day trip north to see Cornelius.

- ...followed by THE EVENT... (11:13-16)

“When I got to Cornelius’ home, I began to tell them about Jesus. But then, just as I was really rolling...

[15] “...the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. [16] “And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

“So, brothers, after hearing all that has happened, here’s my question to you.”

- ...followed by THE QUESTION (11:17)

[17] “...if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”

By telling his friends the whole story, Peter was arguing that it was right for him to have evangelized and baptized the Gentiles.

Even more, he was arguing that it was right for him to have stayed in Cornelius’ house for a few days to hang with the Gentiles.

Well, the leaders in the church listened to this story. They REALLY listened. They took it all to heart and allowed Peter’s story to stretch them. And they got flexible.

Accepting the Ones God Has Accepted (11:18)

[18] When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”²⁴

And - to complete their thought - *“If the Gentiles received eternal life from God, then we have no concerns with Peter’s behavior.”*

The Jewish believers in Jerusalem and the Gentiles believers in Caesarea were all part of the one *body* of Jesus. They were *family*. So, of course Peter should have taken meals with them and stayed with them.

These Jesus-followers stretched and became flexible. They learned to embrace unity in the presence of diversity.

And it was this cross-cultural love and acceptance between Jews and Gentiles that led to the explosion of the Jesus movement across the Roman Empire.

Today, Jesus calls us to the same love in the presence of differences and diversity.

I believe that as we embrace unity in Jesus - here at this place; beyond these walls; cross-culturally; despite differences - we will see the Jesus movement get healthy and explode across San Antonio and beyond.

But, learning to love and accept others despite differences is a challenge and it calls us to the themes for today: Flexibility. Change.

²⁴ This comment about the Gentiles’ **“repentance”** (admitting their guilt before God, owning their need for forgiveness) didn’t give them [eternal] **“life”**. It did, though, LEAD them to trust in Jesus which did give them eternal life.

Conclusion:

Becoming flexible, physically, is difficult. Actually, it's painful.

If you want to increase the range of motion in, say, a shoulder, you're going to have to apply pressure to the muscles and the underlying fascia around your shoulder sufficient to produce change.

Exposing those tissues to the pressure will hurt. But it's a good pain. A physical therapist, whose thumbs are buried deep into your shoulder capsule, will ask, "*Hurts good, don't it?*"

The pain is good and worthwhile because the result is greater *physical* flexibility and more strength through a whole range of motion.

Learning to love and accept in the presence of diversity will require *personal* flexibility, which only comes through the "*good hurt*" of stretching.

So, to wrap up, here are three "good hurt" prescriptions for love in the presence of diversity.

- Pray that God will open your eyes to the beauty of differences between people.
- Intentionally expose yourself to people who are different from you, not to correct them, but to understand and enjoy them. Learn to say "different" rather than "wrong" (or "stupid")
- Seek to reconcile with the brother or the sister if a relationship has fractured over simple differences of opinion.

It's easy to hang with our "tribe." And that's what the surrounding culture is doing, which is leading to an increasingly divided society.

Jesus wants His people to be a community of all tribes and tongues and people groups who find connection in Him.