

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Jesus' re-NEWed Focus on the Whole World Study #2

(Acts 10-11)

Sermon Series: Jesus' Liberating NEW!

(the powerful uniquenesses to the way of Jesus)

Introduction: Worldwide focus...; Except for this one little thing...; everything's perfect, except...

The internet loves a good meme, and the meme, "You had one job..." has had a long shelf life.

"You had one job" - and the sign says, "SOTP!" or "SHCOOL CROSSING".
 "You had one job" - and the yellow stripe on the road is crooked.
 "You had one job" - and the handrail is heading up as the stairs go down.

Imagine that after the COVID-19 crisis is over, you and your family go to Disney-something. The weather is great, and Mickey is there to welcome you. Is it a win if the rides and the shows are all cancelled? It seems to me that this would be Disney's "one job" failure.

Is it a win in my garden if the tomato plants and pepper plants are healthy, tall, and green, but don't have tomatoes or peppers on them? Those plants had "one job..."

We could go on like this all day (and that would be fun). But the "one job" meme has some relevance to what we're going to see this morning as we keep thinking about the NEW that Jesus brought to the world.

He ushered in a new ethic (the way of love), a new covenant (where the Spirit indwells, not a temple, but believers in Jesus), and a new community that sparks a new movement (the *ekklesia*/church).¹

Last Sunday, in our first study of Jesus' Liberating NEW, we found the church, in Jerusalem, BEING the church *in community* and *on mission*.

Today, we'll find that the church, while doing really well in some ways, was failing in the "one job" God had given them.

The Ekklesia, as of Acts 7

Doing Really, Really Well

Great community

The thousands of people who formed the *ekklesia* of Jesus were learning about Him words and works from eyewitness accounts provided by the apostles.

They were showing love to each other by meeting needs of any who suffered lack. And, they were forging deep relationships, taking meals with each other, while they gave themselves to prayer at the drop of a hat.

As community was building, the *ekklesia* was also "on mission."

On mission

They shared Jesus with those who didn't know about Him so that more and more people were coming to faith, daily. Evangelism was happening throughout the city of Jerusalem.

They were bold in their witness, to the point where, even after apostles were imprisoned, they prayed NOT for safety and protection, but for MORE boldness in proclamation.

¹ I'll remind you to check out Andy Stanley's book, Irresistible, the book that prompted me to bring this series of messages. Provocative. Biblical, Helpful.

They depended on God to do what only He could do - touch hearts, convict people of truth, heal bodies - while they faithfully spoke out about Jesus in Jerusalem.²

The church of Jesus was off to a wonderful start and everything was going great. Except for that “one job” thing.

Except for One Thing...

Still in Jerusalem

Seven chapters into the book of Acts, seven years into the life of Jesus’ *ekklesia*, and where is the church?

It is still in Jerusalem. The first Christians were still living - physically and metaphorically - in the shadow of the Jewish temple.

This is a problem because from the very beginning of the NEW chapter that Jesus opened, it was apparent that God was concerned for Jerusalem and everywhere else, for Jews and for everyone else.

God’s heart for the WHOLE world

When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming for baptism, he cried out, **[John 1:29] “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the...world!”**

Just look at the people Jesus attracted and who He chose for companions and followers.

By and large, He didn’t choose or attract the well-connected or the together people.

It was the tax-collector Matthew, the demon-oppressed Mary Magdalene, the broken Samaritan woman at the well, the leper, the Gerasene demoniac, the thief on the cross.

By these choices, Jesus was telegraphing that He was for, not “the together” but for “the other.”

When He spoke to His disciples on a mountain top in Galilee - post-resurrection - He commissioned them to **[Matthew 28:19] “Go therefore and make disciples of ALL THE NATIONS...”**

And right before He was taken from them to ascend into heaven, He told them, **[Acts 1:8] but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in ALL JUDEA and SAMARIA, and even to THE REMOTEST PART OF THE EARTH.”**

They had one job - take the message to Jews and to non-Jews; to all the nations; the remotest part of the earth. Seven years or so after Pentecost, they were still stuck in Jerusalem.

This was a massive miss, a miss by a mile of what Jesus told them to be all about.

This worldwide focus had been a part of God’s mandate when He commanded Abraham, **[Genesis 12:2] “...And so you shall be a blessing!”** (in Hebrew, this is given in the form of a command) and when He promised Abraham, **[Genesis 12:3] “...and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”**

God’s heart to bless and to redeem the whole world was obvious throughout the Jewish Scriptures. The prophets repeatedly spoke about how Israel was to be a light *to the nations*; they were to declare His glory *to the nations*.³

² And even after being beaten for their witness, **[Acts 5:41] they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.**

³ Some years ago, Kathy and I took a multi-week course called **PERSPECTIVES** that made clear that God’s plan and purpose has always been to reach the whole world and that Israel had been “blessed to be a blessing.” If you ever have a chance to take the **PERSPECTIVES** course, I encourage you to do so.

But, as Israel failed in that stewardship - and she failed spectacularly - God tasked Jesus' *ekklesia* to take the message of LIFE to the nations.

It was God's nature to give and to love and put together a plan to reach the whole world. Evidently, it's human nature to be ingrown and internally focused because a few years into the *ekklesia* era, the church was failing, too.

What we'll see for the next few minutes is how the *ekklesia* of Jesus remembered God's heart for all the nations to hear the good news and how it began to re-center on "the other."

First, there was a disrupting event.

Transforming Jesus' Ekklesia to Original Design

Via Disruption (Acts 8:4ff...)

An early church leader named Stephen preached a powerful message in Jerusalem that made the audience VERY angry. So angry that they stoned Stephen to death.

One of the witnesses to this stoning was a young man named Saul, from the city of Tarsus. Saul wasn't throwing rocks, but he was applauding from the sideline.

After Stephen died, Saul set in motion a full-scale persecution against the believers in Jesus - they are referred to at this point as The Way (a term of contempt) - who all happened to be in Jerusalem.

Luke writes that the disciples ***[Acts 8:1]...were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria*** and that ***[v. 4]...those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.***

God used the disruption caused by Saul's and others' arresting, imprisoning, and even killing Christians in a redemptive way to shove the *ekklesia* out of the cocoon of Jerusalem to a world in need.

Over the centuries, God has repeatedly done the same thing, leveraging terrible things like natural disasters and plagues and economic catastrophes and using them to move His people to mission. Only God could take such tragedies and turn them to good.

Among the most disruptive events of my life has been the current COVID-19 crisis. It has been a global, life-taking, livelihood-taking, fear-inducing, society-altering event. And it's not over.

While it's still on-going, let's start asking ourselves, let's ask each other, and let's ask God how He might want to leverage us - the *ekklesia* - to serve this generation with hope in Jesus' Name.

God used a disrupting event at the beginning to move Jesus' *ekklesia* out of Jerusalem.

What if this is the time when the church rises up and lets its light shine like never before through sacrificial love to those who are far away? This moment is what the church was made for; fueled by the Spirit's power, this moment can be our finest hour for Jesus' sake.

Another disrupting event that moved the church forward involved the conversion of a very disrupting individual. It was the same Saul of Tarsus who began the persecution against the church in the first place. He ended up being the man we know as the Apostle Paul, and we'll be looking at his story more in-depth next time.

However, the biggest news on the Great Commission front involved an exchange between Simon Peter, the most visible leader among Jesus' apostles, and a group of very un-Jewish people.

First, let's think about Peter.

Via Opening Up Hearts (the story of Simon Peter)

Setting: Simon Peter at the home of Simon, the [unclean] tanner...

He has been in Jerusalem, taking part in the explosive growth of the church there.

He's had lots of great experiences of storytelling and relationship-building and has watched the life-changing transformations of His fellow Jews.

True, he has experienced some persecution. But even in this, God rescued him from prison, shook a building and a city, and used him to heal many people.

Peter was right where he wanted to be, at the heart of the action, in Jerusalem and among his people.

Peter is about to be stretched.

He is about to learn that Jesus' *ekklesia*, while intended to be delightful, is not intended for the delight and comfort of those involved. He is about to discover - as are we - that God's plan is for the *ekklesia* to be a source of delight to those outside.

When we enter this story, Peter was not in Jerusalem. He was staying with a friend - also named Simon - who was a tanner, by profession, living in the coastal city of Joppa.⁴

The group of very un-Jewish people Peter will soon meet was in the city of Caesarea, also located on the Mediterranean coast, about thirty miles north of Joppa.

Two Visions (10:1-16)

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

A certain Roman centurion named Cornelius lived in Caesarea. He was ***[Acts 10:2] a devout man and one who feared God⁵ with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually.⁶***

⁴ No doubt, Simon the tanner was a Jew. But people who made their living tanning hides and working with leather were considered by most Jews of Peter's day to be *unclean* because they were always working around dead animals. Orthodox Jews like Peter would NOT stay in the home of a tanner. But Peter agreed to stay there.

So, no, Cornelius was not a Jew. But he was a great friend to the Jews, and he had great reverence for the Jews' God.

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

[3] About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in 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."

Cornelius isn't told the purpose of the mission. But that's OK. He's a centurion. He knows how to give AND how to take orders.

He instantly obeyed the angel and sent three men to Joppa to meet Simon Peter, who, as we've seen, was staying in the home of Simon the tanner.

Peter's VISION OF THE SHEET (10:9-16)⁷

Before Cornelius' servants finished their two-day journey and got to Simon the tanner's house, Peter was up on the flat roof of that house, praying.⁸ It's lunchtime. People inside were preparing the mid-day meal and Peter was hungry.

⁵ 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).

⁶ 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." Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army and were famous for loyalty and bravery.

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 (Acts 2), to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and, here, to the Gentiles.

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

At this exact time, Peter **[10] fell into a trance**⁹ and God gave him a vision. We'll call it THE VISION OF THE SHEET, and it was a vision sure to capture the imagination of a hungry man.

[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. These were animals the Jews were forbidden to eat 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!”**

That voice told him to violate Moses' Law and centuries of Jewish tradition. So, of course, he refused the command.¹⁰

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

Peter then got this 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 lowerings of the sheet. Three commands to **“kill and eat”** Three times, **“What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”**

While Peter was left scratching his head, thinking, *“That was weird!”* the doorbell to Simon's home rang downstairs and he heard voices calling for **“Simon, who is called Peter.”**

Two meetings (10:19-29)

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

The Holy Spirit told Peter that He had sent three men to lead Peter on a mission and to go with them without misgivings. (Acts 10:19-20)¹¹

So, Peter came down off the roof and told the three men that he was the one they were looking for.

They told him that Cornelius the centurion had sent them to fetch him and to bring him back to Caesarea. (Acts 10:22)

And Peter, now knowing that the Spirit was in this, and being prepared for all of this by THE VISION OF THE SHEET, agreed to go back with them to meet Cornelius.

The next morning Cornelius' servants, plus Peter, plus six additional men, all left the city of Joppa for Caesarea. (vv. 23b-24)

When they got to Caesarea, they made their way to Cornelius' home, which was packed, because Cornelius **[24b]...had called together his relatives and close friends.**¹²

He wanted everybody to hear what Simon Peter had to say.

The first words of Acts 10:25 are significant. They might not seem to you to be significant, but they were.

At Cornelius' home (10:25-29)

[25a] When Peter entered...

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 (the three denials on the night before Jesus died), he wanted to make sure that he passed THIS test.

¹¹ God's fingerprints are all over this scene. He prepared Cornelius to meet Simon Peter and He prepared Simon Peter with a vision and a command to go to meet Cornelius. God's active involvement continues throughout this whole episode.

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

Nothing in the Jewish Scriptures would have prevented Peter from entering the house of a Gentile. But 1st century Jewish rules of engagement would never have allowed it.¹³ It was taboo.

Jews and Gentiles of that era enjoyed practicing social distancing. They had as little to do with each other as possible.

But Peter felt perfectly free to walk through that door and to ignore that taboo because of THE VISION OF THE SHEET.

The essential lesson from the vision was, *“There are now no clean and unclean animals. You can eat whatever you want to eat.”*¹⁴

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.

As he walked in, ***[25b]... Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him.***¹⁵

Talk about crazy. A soldier in the army of the occupying nation falls down in reverence at the feet of a citizen of the subordinate nation. Cornelius is starving for whatever message Peter had to give.

Peter raised Cornelius up off the floor and then gave a completely awkward, *“Hey, it’s good to be here”* opening to his talk.

[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.”

¹³ Jewish 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 to what is happening here in Acts 10. See also 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

¹⁵ *“Worshiped”* - perhaps too strong. Surely, though, intense honor was intended.

We would consider it pretty rude, pretty insulting, for someone to tell us, *“You surely understand what a challenge it was for someone like me to accept an invitation to speak to you people like you...”*

Those words betray true bigotry.

Peter *correctly* believed that the Jews were God’s chosen people. He *incorrectly* concluded that God didn’t love non-Jews.¹⁶

The Jews 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 non-Jews.

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

He asked Cornelius, *“Why am I here? What can I do for you?”*¹⁷

Cornelius told Peter the whole story of the angel’s message to him to bring Peter to Caesarea, including the part about Peter having a message for him. He then asked Simon Peter to speak. (vv. 30-33)

Peter now totally “gets” that this whole trip to Caesarea has been orchestrated by God so that he could share the Good News of Jesus with Cornelius and his friends and family.

Peter’s (interrupted sermon (vv. 30-43)

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...”

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ ***[29b] “So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.”***

That one comment - "**God is not one to show partiality**" - was revolutionary.¹⁸ It was then and it's no different now.

Partiality toward one group over another is the way the world works. In America and elsewhere, there is political partiality, ethnic partiality, age partiality, economic partiality, gender partiality.

That's the way it is with us. Not with God.

Peter swept away centuries of prejudice when he said, "*God doesn't play favorites.*" Today, you and I must hear the message, "**God is not one to show partiality.**"

He is as passionate that one person finds life in Jesus as He is passionate that another finds life in Jesus.

And with that, Simon Peter told the people in Cornelius' home all about Jesus.

No one like Jesus (10:36-41)

We have no idea about the length of Peter's message. Luke only gives us the Cliff Notes.

Peter outlined the life of Jesus for his audience of Gentiles. He told them about Jesus' power over the evil one and about His healings. I'd bet that He told stories about Jesus' great compassion.

He told them the story of Jesus' death on the cross AND of His resurrection, claiming that he - Peter! - was an eyewitness.

Cornelius and his friends needed to hear of the saving work of Jesus, and Peter told them about it all.

Peter kept going. He was on a roll.

¹⁸ If you look through the Old Testament, you'll find lots of examples of non-Jews in relationship to God. But no first-century Jew would have said, "*God makes no distinction between Jew and non-Jew.*" In those days there was the greatest distinction possible between Jews and non-Jews.

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."

Excitement was building. Cornelius and his guests were with Peter, hanging on his every word. He was just about to give the best-ever invitation. But he never got to give it. He was interrupted.

Another Pentecost! (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.¹⁹ [46] For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God.²⁰

The Holy Spirit knows faith when He sees it - and He saw it there in Cornelius' living room. The Spirit fell on these full-blooded Gentiles who believed, just as He had on believing Jews on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).²¹

In fact, minus a couple of details²², this is a replay of the Day of Pentecost.

Peter saw the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work and understood exactly what it meant

¹⁹ This testifies to the acceptability of Gentiles on the basis of faith alone (which anticipates the decision of the Jerusalem Council, chapter 15).

²⁰ 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.

²¹ And just as He had, more recently, on a group of Samaritans. (Acts 8)

²² The sound of a mighty, rushing wind and the appearance of tongues as of fire resting on each one of them was not present here at Cornelius' home.

He said to those around him, [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?”*** - and these Gentiles were baptized, just like that.

And with that, God proved that with Him there is no partiality. The Jesus movement is an “all-skate” movement.²³

When Jesus died and rose again, God proved His love for all people everywhere. He loves the whole world. Jew and non-Jew. Every tribe, people, tongue, and nation.

In Caesarea, when the Spirit fell on Cornelius and his guests after Peter’s message, the *ekklesia* took one giant step toward fulfilling the commission for which God created it in the first place.

Conclusion:

There are lots of things that mark our own church and churches, generally, today in America. Some are good things, that don’t directly have anything to do with the Bible.

Church buildings and playgrounds and children’s Sunday Schools and targeted ministries to men and women are not commanded. But, they’re fine things to have.

There are other elements of churches in America that we can trace directly back to the Bible.

We have worship through music and consistent teaching of the Bible, times set aside for prayer and gatherings for building relationships, opportunities for people to exercise spiritual gifts in the church and to meet needs in Jesus’ Name.

All of these are important items in any Jesus-centered *ekklesia*.

But, if our church or any *ekklesia* that gathers in Jesus’ Name has all these things and fails to reach out to “the other”, they have failed in the “one job” Jesus gave them to do.

Each *ekklesia* is to serve its own Jerusalem and Judea (culturally and geographically near), its own Samaria (culturally far, geographically near), and its remotest part of the earth (culturally and geographically far).

And each *ekklesia* is to make disciples of all the nations (Greek *ethnos*) because God is crazy about all the people who live in every place.

The way we say it at Northwest is that we are here to help others take their next step with Jesus. I would add, today, EVERYONE *without distinction, without partiality.*

If you are tuning in today as a follower of Jesus, as a member of His *ekklesia*, your Savior is calling you to remember your calling.

Sure, it’s delightful to hang with your tribe and to befriend those who are like you. But, as Andy Stanley puts it in his book, *Irresistible*, *“As followers of Jesus, we should be known as people who like people who are nothing like us.”*

This week, would you look for “the other” in your world? Pray for her. Pray for him. Look for a way to serve the other in Jesus’ Name. Tell him or her about your Jesus.

You, risk the awkwardness and pay the price of inconvenience and take the risk of rejection to be the *ekklesia* to the Cornelius in your world.

²³ Thanks, Andy Stanley.