



The Story of Peter & Cornelius

An Anti-Racism
Bible Study on Unity





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To the Leader

This Bible study on Acts 10, the story of Peter and Cornelius, has accompanied many Women of the ELCA Today's Dream: Tomorrow's Reality anti-racism presentations. It can also be used alone to introduce people to Scripture that affirms diversity as being both of God and part of the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The study consists of an introduction (to be read aloud by the leader at the beginning of the study), five brief sessions with questions for reflection on a passage of Scripture, and a closing prayer or litany. Each session consists of a Scripture reading, a summary statement, and some questions for reflection. You may ask volunteers to read the selected Bible passages (you may wish to secure the readers in advance). After the reading of each Scripture passage, read aloud the summary and then the questions.

It is suggested that the participants be asked to close their eyes as they hear the questions. Allow time between the questions so that participants can enter into and continue in a calm state of meditation. Playing soft music in the background during each meditation period may assist participants to center on the activity.

Time required

45 – 60 minutes

Materials needed

Bibles (one for each participant)

Optional:

A copy of the summary statements (pp. 12–13) for each participant

A copy of the litany for each participant

Recordings of soft music to accompany the meditations

The supplies needed for the aromatherapy you have chosen—a diffuser, essential oil, a scented candle

Newsprint and markers (if optional closing is used)



Introduction

TO BE READ ALOUD BY THE LEADER

In this study we hear the story of Cornelius and Peter as each was prepared by God to be a part of proclaiming God's peace in a changing world. The story expounds the glory of the gospel in its inclusiveness. It tells how God removed a significant barrier so that the two men could come together within God's love to the world through the saving work of Jesus Christ and the sacrament of baptism. The story is based on two visions, both given by God. It takes two visions, two halves of a whole, to eliminate historically significant barriers. This story can be a model for the elimination of all "isms" in our world today. The fact that there was misunderstanding on both sides concerning what each vision meant did not prevent God's will from happening and people's lives from being changed.

Session 1

Scripture reading Acts 10:1–8

Summary

Cornelius, a centurion, was a working officer, experienced and well informed. One hundred foot soldiers were in his command. Described as a “devout man,” he likely attended the synagogue and accepted the ethical monotheism of Jews but did not keep the entire Mosaic law. After his initial terror at seeing the angel in his vision, he had no problem carrying out the assignment given him.

Meditation

Introduce the period of meditation with words like these:

Please close your eyes as you consider some questions. In response to the questions, let the Holy Spirit bring to your memory images and illustrations from your own experience. Take a deep breath now. (Pause.) Relax. (Pause.) There is no rush. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Listen for the Spirit as you silently respond to these questions:

◆ Who gets to decide who is devout?

◆ Are we tempted to decide that people might not be devout—might lack a relationship with God—because they do not worship as we do, do not talk as we do, do not pray as we do?

Session 2

Scripture reading Acts 10:9–20

Summary

God's vision for hungry Peter appears as a temptation: Peter was offered a smorgasbord of unlawful foods. Peter resisted three times, puzzled that God was telling him to do something completely inappropriate.

Meditation

Introduce the period of meditation with words like these:

Please close your eyes as you consider some questions. In response to the questions, let the Holy Spirit bring to your memory images and illustrations from your own experience. Take a deep breath now. (Pause.) Relax. (Pause.) There is no rush. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Listen for the Spirit as you silently respond to these questions:

◆ What are we convinced is inappropriate?

◆ Peter missed lunch. What are we missing when we deem certain things inappropriate?

Session 3

Scripture reading Acts 10:21–33

Summary

The person whom God told Cornelius to send for arrives at his house. Clearly, Cornelius is expectant. He has gathered all his relatives and friends to hear Peter speak.

Meditation

Introduce the period of meditation with words like these:

Please close your eyes as you consider some questions. In response to the questions, let the Holy Spirit bring to your memory images and illustrations from your own experience. Take a deep breath now. (Pause.) Relax. (Pause.) There is no rush. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Listen for the Spirit as you silently respond to these questions:

◆ Why did Cornelius fall at Peter's feet?

◆ How did Peter respond?

◆ Are we sure we would have responded as Peter did?



Session 4

Scripture reading Acts 10:34–43

Summary

The statement of God’s impartiality is the only thing that Peter adds to the story. It is the kernel of the whole story of Peter and Cornelius. Such impartiality goes beyond who we may choose to make our closest friends; it has to do with who we declare can or cannot be recipients of the fullness of God’s grace and call. Because God shows no partiality, those systems that show partiality are not of God.

Meditation

Introduce the period of meditation with words like these:

Please close your eyes as you consider some questions. In response to the questions, let the Holy Spirit bring to your memory images and illustrations from your own experience. Take a deep breath now. (Pause.) Relax. (Pause.) There is no rush. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Listen for the Spirit as you silently respond to these questions:

◆ What would the world look like if there was no partiality?

◆ What would Women of the ELCA look like?

Session 5

Scripture reading Acts 10:44–48

Summary

The receiving of the Holy Spirit occurs without tongues of fire and rushing wind. Yet it was audibly evident, with speaking in tongues as proof to the circumcised believers. It has commonly been noted that in cross-gender groupings men usually talk more than women, and that within multicultural groupings European Americans are quick to speak and often speak a great deal.* In cross-cultural communication, therefore, it is important for those who would tend to remain silent (usually persons of color) to be invited to speak in one way or another.

*See, for example, Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine, 1991), and Eric H. F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1993).

Meditation

Introduce the period of meditation with words like these:

Please close your eyes as you consider some questions. In response to the questions, let the Holy Spirit bring to your memory images and illustrations from your own experience. Take a deep breath now. (Pause.) Relax. (Pause.) There is no rush. Continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Listen for the Spirit as you silently respond to these questions:

- ◆ When have we, as individuals or as a group, been inclined to withhold acceptance from those whom we have regarded as different from ourselves?

- ◆ When have we, as individuals or as a group, been denied acceptance because of a perceived difference between ourselves and others?

Session 5 (continued)

- ◆ When have we, as individuals or as a group, been awakened to the truth of God's inclusivity, as Peter was?

- ◆ Hear again the words of Acts 10:48: "So [Peter] ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days." Take a breath and imagine this new community of hospitality born of the visions given to Cornelius and Peter.

- ◆ Now imagine this community within Women of the ELCA. What does it look like? What does it feel like? What is your role within it?

Closing

END THE STUDY WITH A SIMPLE PRAYER LIKE THE ONE BELOW. OR YOU MAY WISH TO USE THE LITANY ON PAGE 13.

Dearest God, we thank you for your nurturing love and your endless mercy. We are challenged by the fact that you have made us one. Your call for us to love each other compels us to learn what that can mean in our lives, our families, our churches, our communities, and the world. Grant us both the strength and the vision to be faithful to your word, which you speak in love to all people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Optional Closing

Have participants gather into small, diverse groups of three or four women and ask them to share their vision for the future of your congregational unit (or your synodical organization or the churchwide organization of Women of the ELCA). Allow 15 minutes for this discussion and ask each group to offer two or three phrases from their discussion.

Record the phrases on newsprint. The list may be incorporated into existing strategies, or it may be developed further into two or three goals that will encourage and implement greater inclusivity in your organization.

Note: If you plan to use the resulting list in any way, share this information with the participants. If possible, provide a timeline for when they can expect to hear a report on how the list is being used.

Close with a prayer (a sample prayer is given above), or you may wish to use the litany on pages 13.

Summary Statements

1. Scripture reading: Acts 10:1–8

Cornelius, a centurion, was a working officer, experienced and well informed. One hundred foot soldiers were in his command. Described as a “devout man,” he likely attended the synagogue and accepted the ethical monotheism of Jews but did not keep the entire Mosaic law. After his initial terror at seeing the angel in his vision, he had no problem carrying out the assignment given him.

2. Scripture reading: Acts 10:9–20

God’s vision for hungry Peter appears as a temptation: Peter was offered a smorgasbord of unlawful foods. Peter resisted three times, puzzled that God was telling him to do something completely inappropriate.

3. Scripture reading: Acts 10:21–33

The person whom God told Cornelius to send for arrives at his house. Clearly, Cornelius is expectant. He has gathered all his relatives and friends to hear Peter speak.

4. Scripture reading: Acts 10:34–43

The statement of God’s impartiality is the only thing that Peter adds to the story. It is the kernel of the whole story of Peter and Cornelius. Such impartiality goes beyond who we may choose to make our closest friends; it has to do with who we declare can or cannot be recipients of the fullness of God’s grace and call. Because God shows no partiality, those systems that show partiality are not of God.

5. Scripture reading: Acts 10:44–48

The receiving of the Holy Spirit occurs without tongues of fire and rushing wind. Yet it was audibly evident, with speaking in tongues as proof to the circumcised believers. It has commonly been noted that in cross-gender groupings men usually talk more than women, and that within multicultural groupings European Americans are quick to speak and often speak a great deal.* In cross-cultural communication, therefore, it is important for those who would tend to remain silent (usually persons of color) to be invited to speak in one way or another.

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A Litany of Hope

Let us pray:

Merciful God, you have called us from all nations, tongues, and tribes to be your holy priesthood. You have given to us in abundance; we know it is not right that some of us should have only crumbs. For our failure to build as you would have us build,

Grant us forgiveness, O God.

For the miraculous and the untold, for the seen and the unseen, and for all things that keep us going in this time,

We give you thanks, O God.

Build us up and help us grow into your likeness, O God. Heal our hearts; comfort us in our sorrows; rebuild our cities, our farms, our towns, our houses of worship, and our church in your righteousness; and guide us in the faith that makes us one.

Make us strong, O God.

Give us courage as we seek justice and peace. Give us eyes with which to see possibilities for justice. Let us not grow discouraged by our past failures, but give us the strength to act boldly upon our faith.

Make us bold, O God.

Fill our hearts with the love that looks past our differences and the peace that destroys distrust, O God. Let no hatred or bitterness divide us from each other or from the world in which we live. Turn our darkness into the light of day and bless us.

Give us loving spirits, O God.

Above all things, make us confident in the hope that is in you, O God. For you are the power, and the glory, and the wisdom, and the strength of all who turn to you. Build us up and give us hope.

And let the people say Amen!

Amen!

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