

Dreaming God's Dream

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 2, 2025, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Acts 10:1-34](#)

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I think this story about Peter and Cornelius is my favorite from the book of Acts. The Pentecost story is fun and liturgically important. The story of the martyrdom of Stephen is historically important. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is fun for a number of reasons, and it's a story that's personally important to me. As still, the story of Simon Peter and Cornelius remains my favorite – and not simply because I, too, have dreamed about food when I've been hungry.

The story becomes more powerful and nuanced if you know some things about the setting, about the cultural context. The story starts in Caesarea where we are introduced to a new character, Cornelius. Caesarea was a Roman city and port built on the Palestinian coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The Romans based their administrative headquarters for the region in Caesarea. In addition to government offices, the city had all kinds of Roman cultural institutions in it – things like an amphitheater for gladiatorial fights, and temples for pagan sacrifices.

Cornelius was a centurion, a Roman military officer in charge of a hundred soldiers, a rank somewhat similar to that of Colonel in the US Army. Cornelius was serving in the “Italian cohort,” which probably meant he came from Italy and was serving in an elite (or at least internally respected) part in the occupying army. The companies of soldier Pilate paraded into Jerusalem before the Passover as a show of power and control might have been from this cohort. Soldiers from this cohort might have been the soldiers who carried out the execution of Jesus.

Somehow, this high-ranking, Italian army officer had become a devout Gentile. He gave alms generously and prayed to God continually. He was certainly a spiritual seeker and might have been considering converting to Judaism. This is the context in which Cornelius had a vision of an angel, a messenger from God, telling him to send for Simon Peter.

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was in Joppa, some 40 miles to the south, about a two-days walk. He was at the home of someone also named Simon, who was a tanner. It's an interesting home to go visit. Tanners weren't folk you'd invite over for dinner. While it was a job that produced an income, tanners worked with carcasses, fur, and blood – which meant that many fellow Jews considered them impure or unclean most of the time. Plus, they collected urine from around town and allowed it to age into ammonia, a chemical used in cure hides. This left tanners on the margins of society.

Was Simon the only Jesus-follower who had a home big enough to accommodate Peter while he was staying in Joppa? Maybe. Or maybe this is an example of an early commitment of Jesus-followers to walk alongside fellow Jews who were poor, or marginalized, or outcasts.

I can't help but wonder if Peter took to the roof to pray (while someone prepared some food for him) to get away from the smells. Or did his dream, this vision of all kinds of foods coming down from heaven on a sheet, end up including unclean foods because of smells he couldn't escape? Or was he dreaming God's dream because God had a message for him?

The storyteller says that the sheet included all kinds of forbidden foods – pigs, rabbits, shellfish – foods that were considered unclean. God told him to “get up and eat.” Being a good Jew, Peter refused. God responded, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” – three times, to drive the point home.

While Peter was still trying to figure out what the dream meant, three men sent by Cornelius showed up at the tanner's home. With all that's going on with the abuses of power by federal agents these days, there's a vividness to my imaginings of what it might have felt like to have representatives of Roman authority and power show up at the door of your home. While these visitors offered words that sound like they were meant to be reassuring, and Peter acts hospitably, I can't help but wonder how free Peter felt to do otherwise. These visitors represented a centurion stationed in Caesarea, an officer of the occupying army stationed in the center of Roman power in the region. And they wanted Peter to go with them to Caesarea, into the lion's den. I'm not sure Peter had much choice. And I wonder if Peter wondered what would happen when he got there.

When he got to Caesarea, a strange thing happened. Cornelius, the one with the political and military power and authority, greeted Peter by falling to the ground at Peter's feet. None of this was going the way I would have expected it to unfold, and it probably wasn't unfolding as Peter thought it would go either.

If you keep reading to the end of the chapter, you learn that all of this leads to Cornelius and his family and friends receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit and being baptized. So, the most straight forward understanding of this story is that it's about the conversion of Cornelius. But behind the story of the conversion of Cornelius is the story of the conversion of Peter. Peter is changed, too. The dream Peter had, he quickly realizes, concerned far more than food. The unclean foods represent the people he had labeled as unworthy, as unclean. The Romans were 'pigs' to him. The Phoenicians were 'crabs.' God expanded Peter's boundaries, drawing in people Peter had considered 'other,' as 'off-limits,' as 'unacceptable.'

Staying at the home of a tanner meant that Peter was already practicing an inclusion that broke the boundaries his culture and religion had established. Now, God moved him to an even more expansive vision of inclusion. That's what happens when we move from a scarcity mind-set to an abundance mind-set. Scarcity narrowed Peter's vision, and it narrows our vision. Fear and suspicion made Peter limit his sense of who can belong, just as they limit our sense of who can belong. God gave Peter a dream of abundance. God pointed out abundance where Peter saw scarcity. God's dream taught him, “All these are good, too.”

This story of Cornelius and Peter is a story that invited me in. Though my childhood church sent subtle messages of inclusion, they weren't overt. And society's messages of exclusion of queer people were enough to make me think that I couldn't belong – not just that I *didn't* belong, but that I *couldn't* belong. This story of Peter coming to understand that

people he had excluded actually belonged in God's community became an affirmation, a hope, and a promise for me.

We have come such a long way in the half-century since I was a teenager on LGBTQIA+ issues. We've moved forward on civil right. We've moved forward on social inclusion. We've gained more and more understanding of the intricate interplay of gender identity and sexual orientation. And so much more of the church has come to the same conclusion Peter came to: that God shows no partiality; that people who are seen as unacceptable (or worse) by people are not seen that way by God; and that maybe we should start seeing people the way God sees them.

We're not all the way there – not by a long shot. And there are people and factions in the church and within the government who want us to move backward. There are people and factions in the church and the government who haven't dreamed with God of sheets covered with all kinds of foods, and who haven't heard God say, "All of it's good."

And still, of all the resources on earth, God's love is the most abundant. God's love is big enough to include you. God's love is big enough to include me. God's love is being enough to include your family – and, yes, even that family member from whom you are estranged.

In fact, God's love is big enough to include your enemies.

That can be hard to swallow. When someone does something that makes you feel attacked, it can be hard to remember that God loves them, too.

I got an angry email during the weeks preceding the Flamy Grant concert we hosted nine days ago. The email accused me of not being a real Christian – But it made the accusation by asking questions: How can do you think ...? How can you call yourself a Christian? Do you even read the Bible? I felt attacked and I had to decide how I would respond – if at all.

I decided that this person who is loved by God deserved a response. I also decided that I didn't have to answer the questions she raised, at least not in an email. Instead, I suggested that if she was sincerely curious about how I came to a different understandings from hers, we should talk to each other. I invited her to make an appointment. While she claimed to be sincerely curious about my point of view, she refused to meet with me. And in a subsequent email, she wrote things that made it clear to me that she wasn't actually curious about me or my point of view. So I ended that email correspondence.

The fact that God's love is big enough to include this emailer doesn't mean that I was obliged to engage with her on her terms. My friend Bruce Reyes-Chow has three rules for the online world: (1) Not everyone is entitled to your time. (2) You don't have to explain yourself. (3) Logic won't get you out of something logic didn't get you into.¹

I couldn't agree more.

Having boundaries that keeps me sane and safe is not the same as denying God's love for someone. God can love someone, and I can still be the wrong person to incarnate

¹ Bruce Reyes-Chow, "I Stopped Trying to Make it Make Sense," *The Amalgamation*, <https://www.reyes-chow.com/i-stopped-trying-to-make-it-make-sense/> (posted and accessed 26 October 2025).

that love. As big as God's love is, it takes far more people than me, or than this congregation, or than our denominations to make that love visible. That's because God's love is big enough to include everyone.

When we dream with God, we learn this. When we dream with God, we learn that God wants everyone to have the freedom to participate in and experience God's love. When we dream with God, we learn that God wants us all to have enough safety, enough stability, and enough resources to join in God's dream of loving. When we dream with God, we learn about God's vision of justice for everyone and all creation and that by claiming that love, we can join with God as co-creators of that justice.

Let's keep dreaming with God.

Amen.