

Acts 10:1-8  
Creekside COB  
October 23, 2005

## You First!

At the last hEARTsHAPE session, Betty Kelsey introduced you to some thoughts of the spiritual writer and Jesuit priest, Anthony DeMello. One of my favorite DeMello stories involves an elephant and a rat. The elephant was enjoying a cool and relaxing dip in a jungle pool when a rat came to the water's edge and ordered the elephant to get out. "*I will do no such thing,*" the elephant said. The rat replied, "I insist you get out this very minute." "Why?" asked the elephant. "*Because I told you,*" the rat said. "That's no reason," said the elephant. "I shall tell you only after you are out of the pool," the rat replied. "*Then I won't get out,*" the elephant said defiantly.

Later the elephant lumbered out of the pool, walked up to the rat and said, "Now then, why did you want me to get out of the pool?" "*To check if you were wearing my swimming trunks,*" said the rat.

God no more fits into our thoughts and ideas of him than a pair of rat trunks could fit an elephant. "Rat trunks" might be an image preachers should bear in mind before opening their mouths. Everything we think or say about God falls woefully short. God cannot be controlled or contained—not by the preacher's sermon, the theologian's writings, or in the scientist's specimen jar. God can't be miniaturized.

Twenty-first century people are seekers after a God beyond moral codes, articles of belief, and doctrinal stances. An old hymn verse captures our condition—*Our little systems have their day, they have their day and cease to be, they are but broken lights of Thee, and Thou O God, art more than they.* If our confidence in God doesn't exceed the claims that culture makes for itself, it will not matter. Jesus said, "The fields are ripe for

harvest.” Today, the fields are filled with people hungering for the eternal God to stretch their imaginations brings forth inspiration and adoration.

Suppose there was a way to introduce people to the awesome God of creation, and also increase our own faith, understanding, and love for him. Would you want to know how? Today we will examine a style of evangelism that does just that.

Last week I said that Jesus’ style of evangelism was about CONVERSATION, not CONFRONTATION. He told PARABLES instead of making POINTS. He let people answer for themselves the questions he posed and didn’t force-feed them.

The German theologian Karl Barth said the difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that Christians are necessarily better, brighter, better off, or more moral than non-Christians. He called the distinction the, “*NOETIC DIFFERENCE.*” The only difference is that we have heard something that others have not. We have received good news with Jesus’ name and address on it that we want to let others in on. When something good comes your way, what is the first thing you do? You tell someone. “I ate the most fabulous Indian food at a place called Shalamar in Mishawaka. Would you be my guest for dinner and curry-breath on Friday? It’s on me.” “The FDA just announced that chocolate is now a vegetable! Let’s spend tomorrow at the South Bend Chocolate Café.” “I bought an exercise machine that flattens your abs and tightens your tush with just a 20 minute workout a day. Would you like to try it?”

The goal of evangelism is not the conversion of the other person. The goal is the conversion of the receiver *and* the giver of the message. We need to hear the story as much as those with whom we share it. Let me show you what I mean.

There were two men, different as could be. They lived in separate circles with no reason to relate to each other, but God set the stage for their meeting. They were each minding his own business when God intruded and changed everything.

**Cornelius was a centurion-- a prominent man who had one hundred men under his command. Being Roman, he was a hated outsider. He was the kind of man that makes religious people cringe. He was devout. He feared God. He prayed to God... a lot. He did all he could to do good and help the unfortunate. Don't you just hate it when people who have nothing to do with church live this way? The audacity of non-Christians who "out-Christian" professed Christians. Cornelius had that kind of audacity.**

**An angel appeared to Cornelius and said God had heard his prayers, seen his generosity, and had a message for him. The angel told him to send two servants to Joppa and bring back a guy named Peter. *This begs a question.* Why did the angel tell *Cornelius* to fetch Peter? Why didn't the angel just skip this step and tell Cornelius himself? Is this evidence that God doesn't send angels to do a human's job? Visions and revelations aren't the usual way people come to faith. When it comes to sharing the story of Jesus, God decided it is best done person-to-person, face-to-face in the context of a friendship.**

**The day after Cornelius' encounter, Peter had one. Spread before him were all kinds of birds and animals, and God said, "*Pick a critter, any critter, kill it and eat it.*" Peter refused and was confused. Why would God want Peter, an observant Jew, to break the dietary law for a ham sandwich? Why would God ask Peter to sin? A barrier was about to be broken. God was about to convert Peter's understanding of what was and wasn't acceptable.**

**Cornelius' heard Peter was coming, and invited a house full of family and friends. And when Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and worshiped him. But Peter stood him up and said, "*I'm a man, just like you.*" When it comes to sharing your faith, your greatest asset is your humanness. You don't behave like someone you are not. You don't have to act holy. You don't have to quote scripture every other sentence. You don't have to know all the answers. St. Paul said, "God's treasure is in cracked, clay pots." The Spirit is capable of using**

crackpots like you and me, just as we are, with all of our strengths *and* weaknesses.

Now and then, people who discover I am a pastor will say, “You don’t look like a minister.” I respond, “Thank you very much... I think.” At times I’ll ask, “What’s a minister *supposed* to look like?” Sometimes I’ll ask a more pointed question-- “How are pastors supposed to act?” I’ve been saddened by the answers. Many say they would never talk about their questions and concerns with a pastor for fear of being judged, pressured, and “preached at.” I can recall meaningful conversations I’ve had with people who were willing to share thoughts and questions about God and the spiritual life, but probably wouldn’t have shared much if they had known what I was.

God doesn’t ask you to memorize a scripted presentation or change your personality in order to share your faith. You are made in God’s image and made for a purpose—to *declare the wonderful works of him who called us out of the darkness and into the light*. Are you a good listener? Do you have a sense of humor? Do you enjoy meeting new people? Have you experienced joy and trials? Do you believe and sometimes struggle with unbelief? Are you human? Good! You have what it takes to be a spiritual friend. You are an adequate avenue through which God can work.

It’s easy to think that God could have chosen a more effective way to get his message across. But in God’s wisdom, which to us doesn’t seem all that wise, God clothed himself in the flesh we call Jesus. In Jesus, God hallowed our humanity. As I look back to the people who ushered me into the faith, they were an interesting mix of the saintly, the holy, and spiritual, and these same people were also rascals, characters, and cut-ups.

After Peter got Cornelius on his feet and established a bond with him, Peter said something remarkable to everyone in the house. “I am a Jew, and you know I’m not to associate with people from a different country or culture; but God showed me that I cannot call anyone common or unclean.” Peter is saying, “Look, I don’t know all of what’s going on here, but God is telling me

**something. I'm taking a big risk being here. Everything I learned up till now tells me I shouldn't be. But God is teaching all of us something here today. Jesus has sent me to be your friend. Now I know that God shows no partiality, but anyone who fears him and does what is right is accepted by him."**

**Peter didn't put Cornelius into a category of "pagan", "lost", or "unsaved" or imply Peter was inside and Cornelius was outside. He was humble. He came to speak, but he also came to listen and learn. God is telling us to think this one through. What category under which you have filed people needs to crumble? What boundary are you called to cross? Who is the Cornelius you are called to go to and learn from and become spiritual friends?**

**Let me share one last insight. An evangelist doesn't barge into a relationship with the idea that everything the other needs resides with him. In the bulletin quote, John Taylor says that when engaging with people who are different, we must be clothed with humility, take off our shoes, and not forget that God was there before our arrival.**

**God was already at work in Cornelius before Peter showed up. I remember an old Methodist missionary relating an incident that happened to him many years before in India. He had gone into a remote village that had not yet encountered Christianity, and he had a remarkable encounter with an old Hindu man that the people looked to as a spiritual leader. The Hindu asked whom this Jesus was that the missionary spoke of. He told the old man the story of Jesus' life, and as he did, the man began to cry. Not knowing the cause of the tears he asked the man why he was crying. "I am so glad," he said. "I have met this Jesus before, but I never knew his name."**

**We aren't know-it-alls. God's ways are beyond the measure of our minds. If we listen to people, we may discover that God was there before we arrived. Sometimes we are the ones who introduce people to the presence that has been knocking at the door of their hearts.**

**Yesterday, waiting for the start of Charles Stouder's funeral, I opened the memorial card and noticed the poem inside. I usually only glance at the verses, but this one grabbed me. It has no title, and the author is unknown. For my purpose this morning, I've named it, "The Creed of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Evangelist."**

**When I say, "I'm a Christian", I'm not shouting, "I am saved."  
I'm whispering, "I get lost". That's why I choose this way.**

**When I say, "I'm a Christian", I don't speak of this with pride.  
I'm confessing that I stumble and need someone to be my guide.**

**When I say, "I'm a Christian", I'm not trying to be strong.  
I'm professing that I am weak and pray for strength to carry on.**

**When I say, "I'm a Christian", I'm not bragging of success.  
I'm admitting I have failed and cannot every pay the debt.**

**When I say, "I'm a Christian", I'm not claiming to be perfect.  
My flaws are too visible, but God believes I'm worth it.**

**When I say "I'm a Christian", I still feel the sting of pain.  
I have my own share of heartaches, which is why I seek His  
name.**

**When I say, "I'm a Christian", I do not wish to judge.  
I have no authority, I only know that I'm loved."**

**Brian McClaren says we are being converted to a new kind of Christianity in which Christians are converted first. Instead of being Christians who judge and disrespect those who do not believe, we are called to join Jesus, Peter, and people like Charles Stouder who befriend others, and believe that as they do, everyone involved will become closer to God and Christ.**