Later this week I am taking some vacation time to visit my best friend who lives on Hilton Head Island. As you all know, deep, abiding friendships are rare, and they require devoted time together. Which means I will be gone next Sunday, which means that this morning is my last opportunity to speak with you prior to November 8th.

I stand before you, then, on the eve of an election…an election that most of us would say is more disturbing, more confounding, and potentially more divisive than any election in our country’s history. Now, as you know, it is against the law of our land for me as a pastor to persuade you or influence your vote for one candidate over another, so let me be perfectly clear right from the start: my encouragement is for each adult here to study the issues, pray fervently, and vote as your conscience dictates. Vote as you feel led by the Holy Spirit and instructed by the Word of God. And be thankful that we get a vote; be thankful for the sacrifice of men and women throughout the past 250 years who have defended our freedom to vote…it is a privilege not shared among millions who live in other countries around the world.

My message this morning will be on Acts 10:1-29a, and that is simply the passage that comes next on our journey through Acts. Nevertheless, it is a timely passage and one that speaks to the tension of this election and the tension of our age. Before I get started, I will ask that you resist any attempt to “interpret” my message as a plug for one party or one candidate over another. I can assure you that is not my intent, nor does the text lead us there. If we’re listening, I believe God will impress upon us a powerful reminder of HIS sovereign activity that should bring us hope…and I think we could all use a healthy dose of hope this week, amen? Please stand then, and let us read aloud together Acts 10:1-29a.

Our text begins with a very detailed description of this man named Cornelius. Luke writes: At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort.

Caesarea was an important town. As the Roman provincial capital, Caesarea was the home to the Roman prefect. Accordingly, several hundred Roman soldiers of an auxiliary force known as the Italian Cohort were stationed in Caesarea. In fact, we know that the Italian Cohort was in Caesarea through the year AD 69 according to ancient documents found in Austria. This cohort would have consisted of 600 men, and Cornelius, as a centurion, would have been over approximately 100 of those men. Here’s a little bit of trivia regarding the name Cornelius…in 82 BC the great Roman general Cornelius Sulla freed over 10,000 former slaves after achieving
victory in his second Roman civil war. Consequently, all 10,000 freed slaves took on the name of “Cornelius.” It is likely, then, that the Cornelius in our text is the son or grandson of a former slave who was freed and became a Roman citizen. The history of liberation from slavery in his family may well account for his deep faith in God and his affinity with the Jews.

Luke also describes Cornelius with these words: “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.” We learn later by the testimony of Cornelius’s people in vs. 22 that he is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation. So…is Cornelius a Roman proselyte…and he a converted Jew? No…we should not think he has “converted” to Judaism, but he has been deeply influenced by the Jews to the extent that he has rejected the Roman gods and become monotheistic. He has also adopted some of the Jewish piety such as generosity to the poor and a life of prayer. In fact, Luke says next that Cornelius is praying during the ninth hour, which we have noted previously was the dedicated hour of prayer in Judaism and the time that sacrifices were made in the Jerusalem Temple. Luke writes: About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”

We must think well of this man Cornelius…the text leaves us no choice! Yes he’s a Roman soldier and an officer…yes he’s one of the “occupiers” and an enemy of Israel…yes he’s likely wealthy and powerful…yes he’s not circumcised or baptized or confirmed or even praying in the name of Jesus—but note this: God loves this man and his family and his servants and all of his household. And God hears the prayers of this Roman…God sees the heart of this soldier and God notices the generosity of an unchurched, non-Christian who is thought of as damned, unclean, and off-limits to the people of Israel and their interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures.

Listen to me now: God will never, ever, ever fit in your box. God can and does love and listen to all kinds of people all over the world who turn their hearts to him and open their hearts to the poor. Cornelius is what we might call a “spiritually open person” who has a deep, intuitive hunger for God and consequently a deep and committed love for people. You will find many people like Cornelius in mosques and shrines and jungles and urban ghettos and executive suites and even in the White House! This story already reveals to us that God is always looking, always listening, always whispering to the hearts of men and women that He is there, that He loves His creation, that He is watching over all people all the time. The term for this biblical doctrine is called “common grace.” God sends the rain to fall on the good and the bad. God forms every human being to bear his image and places within them a desire to know Him. GOD LOVES PEOPLE…ALL OF THEM! And clearly, a sincere heart that prays to God is a soul who is also available to God, and that is what we see next. God has a plan for this Roman Gentile that He reveals in vs. 5, “And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” Pay attention now: common grace

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is wonderful, but it’s not enough. This man who prays to the God who is there will not be saved through common grace…He and his household need Jesus. That is why God is arranging this divine appointment…so that this spiritually open man and his spiritually open family will have the opportunity to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and be saved…that they would be filled with the Holy Spirit and become followers of Jesus and serve to advance His kingdom on earth.

And also note…the Church needs Cornelius and his family. The Gospel must break out of Jewish circles and make its way to the very ends of the earth. Millions of souls will perish if the gospel does not transcend homogenous groups of believers who care only for people of their own race, tribe, language, culture, and heritage. God has found his man to break the mold, and so He now arranges an appointment for Cornelius to meet with a Christian…a certain apostle named Peter. There’s only one problem: the apostle named Peter has some major hang-ups with Romans and Gentiles in general…as we shall see.

Luke reports that Cornelius sends two servants and a devout soldier to make the 39 mile trip to Joppa to track down Peter. They likely leave around noon or so, so they will not arrive until about noon the next day. Cornelius fully briefs his people on his encounter with the angel, so these messengers are on a mission from God…can you see the irony here? The Gentiles are on a mission trip to connect with the Jews! That’s funny…

Let’s pick up the story now beginning with vs. 9: The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat. Just a note here: remember that Simon the Tanner lived by the sea…so can you see his house in your imagination? No doubt Peter is going up on the rooftop to pray because it will provide him the best view of the ocean, and even though it’s noon, the breeze from the Mediterranean will keep him sufficiently comfortable. But notice, Peter is suddenly hungry. That doesn’t surprise us because we think of noon as time for lunch, but in the ancient world they would typically eat a meal around 10ish and then again in the late afternoon. So this hunger is unusual…his request for a meal to be prepared at noon is unusual, which is why it takes a while to get it ready. We should rightly assume here that God has created this hunger within Peter, and of course that hunger explains why God chooses this particular vision in order to get Peter’s attention.

Let’s pick up the story at vs. 10: And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”
So Peter is hungry, waiting for lunch, and God suddenly visits Peter in a vision. The vision is a big huge MENU! This sheet with all these animals includes kosher animals like goats and sheep and oxen, but then there are creepy reptiles and birds as well! The voice from heaven says, “Dig in Pete! Order whatever you want! It’s all good!” Actually, God says, “Rise up, kill and eat…” I personally interpret that verse to mean “Go deer hunting.” You may have a different interpretation.

Peter’s interpretation is…understandable, and wrong. Peter sees this sheet with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds that he has been taught his whole life to avoid. In his Jewish mind, most of these creatures would make him unclean before God if he ate them…and some of them were actually gross to even think about eating. So Peter responds like a good Jew, “By no means, Lord! I have NEVER eaten anything that is common or unclean.”

So…here’s what Peter just did. He denied a direct order from God…and He justified his disobedience by pointing to his own devotion to God! He’s essentially saying, “God…I simply can’t do what you are commanding because my religion says eating those animals is an offense to God, and since I always aim to please God, I’m going to have to say no to you God…I’ll stick with a salad thank you very much.”

How often do we quote God as a means of justifying our disobedience to God? I know that’s a dangerous statement, but it’s true. Conservatives quote God as means of justifying their fear and condemnation of people. Liberals quote God as a means justifying their hedonistic lifestyle. Pastors quote God as a way of justifying their condemnation of other denominations and atheists even quote God as a way of justifying their conviction that God doesn’t exist! If ever there was a universal tendency amongst all human beings in every generation, it is the tendency to quote or, better yet, misquote God as a justification for disobedience. Peter is not alone in his response…he actually represents the vast majority of well-intentioned religious people throughout the world. But listen to how God responds in vs. 15: And the voice came to him a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Note what God did not say. God did not say, “Everything has always been clean.” That’s not what He said. Here’s why: there was a time when God was very clear about what He wanted his people to eat and not to eat, particularly while they were journeying through the wilderness. There was a time when God had set His people apart to provide them a specific identity and a specific revelation of Himself that would serve as the unique revelation of God to the world. During that time His people were to stand out from the nations in the way they lived, the food they ate, and the way they worshipped. They were not to intermarry; they were not to live as the other cultures lived because this particular group of people was chosen by God to represent Him to the world. The Jews were God’s chosen people to carry His name…that’s history and it’s

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important history. But a new time has come now. God has “made clean” those things that were formerly not clean. God has provided access where there was formerly no access. God has made a way where there was formerly no way.

This is the age of the Messiah. Jesus has come. He suffered the cross and rose again in victory, and now there is an open door…for everybody. There is no longer a need for such distinctions as circumcision or dietary laws. Jesus has broken every barrier such that all people are now welcome and have access to God.

Peter is perplexed about what this vision means, but not for long. God’s divine appointment has arrived. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 17: Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he has seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them. And Peter went down to the men…”

I so love this story! Notice that Peter is perplexed…he can’t make sense of it all…he is pondering and confused. But then God has arranged an appointment…there are people at the gate that He has sent who will help make sense of it all. And God says to Peter, “Go with them without hesitation…” The term here actually means, “Go with them without discrimination…”

When Peter goes down stairs he meets three Roman men, all Gentiles, and one of them is suited up as a Roman soldier. He inquires as to the reason they are there, and the men reply in vs. 22: Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.

Just imagine if these men had arrived 24 hours earlier…just imagine how Peter would have responded. “By no means will I go with you! I have never defiled myself by entering into a Gentile home, eating Gentile food and being contaminated by you pagan scum. And I SERIOUSLY doubt that an angel of God spoke to your boss…I don’t think God hears the prayers of Gentiles or speaks to Roman soldiers who lord authority over us Jews…we are, after all, God’s chosen people. I don’t know who your boss is praying to, but it’s not our God!” He may have not been that harsh, but that would have been the attitude of his heart…because that was the attitude of his heart about five minutes ago, right?

But note…because of God’s sovereign election…because God revealed Himself to Peter at just the right time…because God revealed himself to Cornelius at just the right time…because the three men showed up at the gate at just the right time…Peter simply smiles and says, “Come on
in…let me show you to your room.” Friends…God is sovereign. God makes divine
appointments. God continues to speak to the most unusual people at just the right time in order to
accomplish His purposes. Have a little faith…God is in control!

The next day Peter, along with six other believers from Joppa, joins the three Romans on a road
trip back to Caesarea, and the day after that they arrive at the home of Cornelius. Let’s pick up
the story in vs. 24: Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close
friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.”

In the ancient world, the Romans and Greeks had a notion that the gods would take on human
form and show up on earth every so often, so it’s possible that Cornelius thinks of Peter as a
man-god who is worthy of worship. Peter quickly corrects Cornelius as we read in vs. 26: But
Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” And as he talked with him, he went in
and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it
is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I
should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for you, I came without
objection.”

Look at what Peter has learned: whatever religious justification he had for excluding “outsiders”
has been stripped away by God who has shown Peter…and all of us…that we should not call
ANY person common or unclean. Alright, we’ll pick up here next week, but let’s have some
application time.

I want you to take a pen or a pencil if you can find one there in front of you, and I want you to
write down on some paper or a your hand or your neighbor’s hand those people who are in your
vision. In other words, if God were to give you a vision this morning, and you saw that blanket
or that sheet being lowered down, and the four corners of the blanket represented the four
corners of the earth, who in that blanket would lead you to say, “By no means, Lord!” By no
means will I accept those people. By no means would I entertain those people. By no means
would I trust my children with those people. By no means would I accept that those people are
praying prayers that you hear. By no means could I imagine that those people have an open heart
and desire to know you. By no means would I ever risk telling those people about Jesus. By no
means could I ever consider those people to be right about some things that I need to listen to. By
no means should those people be forgiven. By no means should those people be considered
clean.

Church, listen: What God has made clean, do not call common. What God has made clean, do
not call unclean.
Now I will not interpret your vision for you. I suspect that some of you are going to be incredibly perplexed about the vision God has given you because for so long you have felt religiously justified in excluding, rejecting, avoiding, and defaming that group of people He just showed you. Even now you are running through all the scriptures and websites and the sermons you’ve heard in your life that have reinforced your opinion about those people. But listen: according to what we just read, we should not call ANY people common or unclean. God loves them all, God desires them all, and He has removed any justification we have for avoiding or dismissing them. That means we must be open to and willingly welcome into our lives the democrats and the republicans…the liberals and the conservatives…the pro-lifers and the pro-choice…ers…the Muslims and the Hindus…the atheists and the humanists…the homosexuals and the transgenders…even the Indianapolis Colts. God loves them all, and Jesus has made a way for all people to be reconciled to God through His blood on the cross. Our job is to go where we are sent, to whom we are sent, and to receive those who have been sent to us without discrimination. That doesn’t mean we accept all behaviors as good, healthy, or normative…it does mean we see people as those deeply loved by God who need to see and experience the love of Jesus Christ through His church.

I know some of you are perplexed by what God is showing you right now, but listen: There are people standing at your gate. God has already sent people into your life who are there or will soon arrive to help change your mind and your heart. God is always arranging divine appointments to soften our hearts towards people, to provide opportunity for us to tell them about Jesus, and to demonstrate the grace and love of Jesus through one divine appointment at a time.

Does that mean that God might even be able to use Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump? Yep…God can even use politicians! God will occasionally use leaders and preachers and teachers and people with influence, but most often God will use the guy who comes to your house to fix your cable service, or the lady who waits on you at the restaurant this afternoon, or the doctor who is performing surgery on you later this week, or the person covered in tattoos who just happens to sit next to you on the plane tomorrow morning…and God will use you, too.

So be ready…be open. When the Lord gives you a hunger, pay attention to the menu. When He calls you to go, go without discrimination. When you meet a stranger, be looking for the Divine appointment.

Now, let me close by simply saying this: it’s going to be OK! We are going to be OK. Jesus rose on the third day, He is our King, our God is sovereign, and whatever the outcome of this election or any election, whatever the outcome of the surgery or the job interview, we’ll be alright. This is the hour when we as the church must demonstrate our faith and our confidence in our God. Our God reigns, amen? Let’s pray.