

EMPOWERED FOR RADICAL WELCOME

Acts 10:1–48

Introduction

Over the last several weeks, we have been walking with the early church through Acts, watching what happens when the Holy Spirit takes hold of ordinary people and forms them into the living body of Christ. At Pentecost, the Spirit came with power and gave birth to something new. Since then, we have watched that same Spirit form a church marked by prayer, generosity, courage, holiness, bold witness, and transformation. Again and again, Acts has shown us that the church becomes the church when it learns how to follow where the Spirit leads, especially when the Spirit leads beyond what is familiar.

And that brings us to Acts 10. Because once you say that the Holy Spirit empowers people, the next question becomes unavoidable: **for whom?** Who is this gospel actually for? Who belongs at the table? Who gets welcomed in not as a tolerated guest or an exception, but as a full member of the household of God?

Acts 10 is one of the most important chapters in the New Testament because it tells the story of a church being forced to face that question head-on. And the first obstacle in the story is not Cornelius. It is Peter. The first obstacle is not that someone outside the church is resisting God. The first obstacle is that someone inside the church has categories and assumptions that no longer match what God is doing.

That is still how it works now. Sometimes the greatest barrier to radical welcome is not hostility “out there.” It is certainty in here. It is the assumptions we inherit, the walls we stop questioning, the quiet internal list of who belongs and who does not. Acts 10 is the story of the Holy Spirit blowing open those assumptions and making it clear that the gospel of Jesus Christ is bigger than the church’s comfort, bigger than the church’s tradition, and bigger than the church’s boundaries.

And that is why this matters for St. John’s. Radical welcome is never just about being friendly. It is about whether we are willing to let the Spirit reshape the church around the people God is calling in, and whether we trust that the Spirit can keep leading a church even when the next faithful step does not look like the last one.

Movement 1: God was already at work before Peter arrived

Acts 10 opens not with Peter, but with Cornelius. That matters. Luke wants us to meet this man before Peter ever does. Cornelius is a centurion in Caesarea, a Gentile, a Roman officer—the kind of person Peter would have immediately understood as outside the covenant boundaries of Israel. Peter already has a category for a man like that. He already knows where a man like that does not belong. His immediate thought would be, “but the Bible says...” But Luke tells the story differently.

He does not describe Cornelius as hostile to God or spiritually indifferent. He tells us that Cornelius is devout. He fears God. He gives generously. He prays constantly. And then Luke shows us Cornelius receiving a vision from God. Before Peter has preached a sermon, before Peter has crossed a threshold, before Peter has figured out what he thinks about any of this, God is already at work in Cornelius’s life.

That is the first thing the church has to hear in Acts 10. Peter is not bringing God to a godless man. Peter is being sent to someone in whom God is already moving.

Churches can easily forget that. We can start acting as if grace only begins once someone comes through our doors, learns our language, and becomes familiar to us. But Acts 10 will not let the church believe that. God is already drawing, stirring, and preparing before Peter ever arrives.

Imagine discovering that a neighbor who has never been to church has already been praying on their own, reading Scripture late at night, and wrestling honestly with God long before anyone from the church ever knocks on the door. Suddenly you realize you are not bringing God into that story. You are being invited to witness what God was already doing before you showed up. That is Peter's first lesson, and it is one the church still needs.

Because if we are not careful, we will make the same mistake with all kinds of people. We will assume that because someone does not fit our expectations, they must somehow be outside the reach of God. Perhaps they belong somewhere, but they don't really belong here. We may not say it that bluntly, but we can act as if some people remain spiritually suspect until the church decides otherwise. Acts 10 says otherwise.

It says the Spirit of God is not confined to our assumptions. It says the people we have been taught to keep at a distance may be people in whom God is already planting hunger, already stirring faith, already pouring out grace. Radical welcome does not begin with the church deciding to be generous. It begins with the church recognizing that God got there first.

That has something to say to us as an Open and Affirming church, a stance we adopted almost two years ago. One of the great failures of the church has been the assumption that LGBTQ people stand at some special distance from God, as if before they could be fully welcomed, something about them would first need to be corrected, hidden, or apologized for. But Acts 10 tells a different story: God does not wait for Peter's approval before showing up in Cornelius's life, and God does not wait for the church's permission before pouring out grace.

The truth is, the church has seen the fruit of the Spirit in LGBTQ Christians over and over again—deep faith, sacrificial love, prayer, wisdom, compassion, holiness, and a real desire to follow Jesus. Sooner or later the church has to reckon with what is right in front of it: God is already at work in the lives of people some Christians were taught to exclude.

And there is a larger congregational word here too. If God was already at work in Cornelius before Peter arrived, then the church has to stay open to the possibility that God may already be at work in people, places, and possibilities we have not yet fully recognized. God may already be opening doors we have not walked through yet. God may already be preparing relationships, ministries, and futures that do not look like the church we inherited but may still be part of the church God is calling us to become.

That means the first step toward radical welcome is not opening our mouths. It is opening our eyes. It is asking God for the grace to recognize where the Spirit is already moving before we ever arrive, and then the courage to follow where that movement leads.

Movement 2: Before Peter can welcome Cornelius, God has to confront Peter

If Cornelius teaches us that God is already at work beyond the church's assumptions, Peter teaches us something just as important: sometimes the person who most needs conversion in a story of welcome is not the outsider trying to get in. Sometimes it is the insider who thinks he already understands how God works.

Peter goes up on the roof to pray, and while he is there he falls into a trance and sees a vision. A sheet comes down from heaven filled with animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter immediately refuses: "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

On one level, Peter's answer sounds faithful. He is trying to honor what he has been taught. He is trying to obey the categories he inherited. He is not resisting God because he is rebellious. He is resisting God because he has confused faithfulness to God with loyalty to a set of boundaries that no longer match what God is doing. That is a dangerous thing for religious people, because it can feel so righteous while it is happening.

Peter thinks he is defending holiness. But the voice speaks again: **"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."** And the text tells us this happens three times. The issue is not really food. Food is just the way the lesson gets delivered. The real issue is that Peter has a whole set of categories for who is in and who is out, who is clean and who is unclean, and the Holy Spirit has come to tell him that those categories are no longer fit for the work God is doing.

Before Peter can cross the threshold into Cornelius's house, God has to dismantle the threshold inside Peter himself.

That is still how it works in the church. It is possible to inherit assumptions so deeply that they stop feeling like assumptions at all. They just feel obvious. They feel biblical. They feel permanent. We stop asking where they came from, who they exclude, and whether they still bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ. We simply and most often sincerely assume that because something was handed to us in religious language, it must therefore be the final word of God. **Acts 10 is one of the places in Scripture where the church is forced to watch the Holy Spirit challenge exactly that.**

Now I want to be careful here. This is not a sermon about throwing out Scripture or pretending holiness no longer matters. It is not a sermon about saying, "The Bible does not matter, so let's just do whatever feels right." That is not what Peter is doing, and it is not what the church is called to do. The point is not that discernment no longer matters. The point is that discernment must remain open to the living voice of the Holy Spirit and to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, even when that means God confronts conclusions we thought were settled. That is one reason this chapter matters so deeply to our life as an Open and Affirming church.

Because the church has often spoken about LGBTQ people using the language of Peter before the vision. Maybe not always the exact same words, but the same structure: outside the pattern, spiritually suspect, not fit for full belonging. Maybe tolerated at a distance, maybe allowed in the pew, but not fully trusted, not fully affirmed, not fully embraced. And all of it has often been wrapped in the claim that this is simply what faithfulness requires.

But Acts 10 ought to make the church much more humble than that. It reminds us that sincere religious certainty can be wrong. It reminds us that people can use holiness language and still find themselves resisting the very movement of God. It reminds us that a person can say, “By no means, Lord,” and mean it sincerely, while still standing in the way of grace.

So when St. John’s says that we are Open and Affirming, we are not saying that Scripture does not matter. **We are saying we have taken Scripture seriously enough to let passages like Acts 10 confront the church’s habit of drawing lines where the Holy Spirit is erasing them.** We are saying that when we look at the life of Jesus, the witness of Acts, and the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of LGBTQ Christians, we can no longer keep using the language of exclusion and call it faithfulness. We are not Open and Affirming in spite of the Scriptures. We are Open and Affirming because of them!

That is not because we are trying to be trendy. It is because we believe the church has too often looked at people in whom God was clearly at work and still insisted on speaking to them as if they were unclean. And Acts 10 tells the church that it does not have that right. **What God has made clean, you must not call profane.**

Movement 3: Radical welcome is not polite hospitality. It is a decision about who belongs at God’s table.

By the time Peter arrives at Cornelius’s house, the story has already made one thing clear: this is not just about manners. It is not about whether Peter will be nice to a stranger. It is about whether Peter will recognize as family the people God has already claimed.

Churches often talk about welcome in a way that sounds warm but remains carefully limited. We say, “everyone is welcome here,” and sometimes we mean it. But a lot depends on what that sentence actually means. Are people welcome to attend, but not really belong? Welcome to worship, but not lead? Welcome to sit in the pew, but not bring their whole selves into the life of the church?

Because there is a kind of welcome that is really only proximity. It lets you be near the church without ever truly being part of it.

Acts 10 will not let the church settle for that kind of welcome. Peter says to Cornelius and his household, “God has shown me that I should not call **anyone** profane or unclean.” That is the moment the vision comes into focus. It was never really about food. It was about people. It was about the people Peter had been trained to keep at arm’s length. It was about whether the grace of God in Jesus Christ was truly wide enough to embrace those who had always been considered beyond the line.

And the answer of Acts 10 is yes. Not a cautious yes. Not a yes with an asterisk. Not a yes that says, “You may come close, but we still need some distance.” It is a yes rooted in the action of God. God has already spoken to Cornelius. God has already prepared Peter. And in a few moments, God will pour out the Holy Spirit on Gentiles in a way Peter cannot deny. The whole chapter is pressing toward this truth: when God says yes to people, the church does not get to answer no.

That is why radical welcome is never just a matter of hospitality style. It is a theological decision about who belongs at God’s table and on what basis.

So let me say plainly what we mean.

When we say that at St. John's all are welcome here, we are not saying, "You may attend here if you keep the complicated parts of your life off to the side." We are not saying, "You may come in, but we are still not sure whether God can fully bless your relationships, your calling, your gifts, or your future." We are not saying, "You may worship with us, but we reserve the right to treat you as a permanent theological problem." We are saying something much stronger than that.

We are saying that NO ONE is outside the love of God, outside the image of God, outside the call of God, and outside the full life of Christ's church. They are not guests on probation in the kingdom of God. They are beloved children of God. And that means who you are is not a barrier to belonging, discipleship, leadership, service, marriage, covenant love, or full participation in the life of this church.

And I do not want to leave this only at the level of sexuality, because Acts 10 will not let us do that either. The issue here is larger than one group of people, even though that group matters deeply. **The issue is whether the church is willing to let the Holy Spirit decide who belongs, or whether we will keep trying to reserve that right for ourselves.**

Because once Peter says yes to entering Cornelius's house, he is stepping into a future that will alter the shape of the church itself. This is not just about one family being welcomed. **This is about the gospel crossing a threshold from which the church cannot return unchanged. Once Gentiles are welcomed not as guests but as full participants in the people of God, the church has to become a different kind of church.**

That is where this text presses on us as a congregation too. If we really mean what we say about welcome, then sooner or later welcome will ask something of us. It will ask whether our worship, our habits, our priorities, our leadership, our partnerships, and even our imagination of what church is supposed to look like are flexible enough to receive the people God sends.

Imagine a family with a beautiful dining room that never gets used. The table is polished, the chairs are perfect, everything is exactly in place. Then they begin hosting people every week. Before long, the room does not look pristine anymore. Extra chairs get pulled in. The furniture gets rearranged. The room gets messier, but it also becomes more alive. Because the purpose of the dining room was never to stay perfect. The purpose was to make room for people. **That is what radical welcome does to a church. It rearranges the room.**

And that is why this chapter matters not only for our identity as an Open and Affirming congregation, but also for our willingness to follow the Spirit into whatever comes next. If God sends people we did not expect, opens partnerships we did not plan, or leads us into forms of faithfulness that do not look like what St. John's looked like fifty years ago, then the question will not be whether we prefer the old arrangement. The question will be whether we trust the Holy Spirit enough to let the room be rearranged for the sake of the gospel.

Movement 4: The Holy Spirit moves before Peter is finished

Peter begins preaching in Cornelius's house, and what he says is simple: he tells the story of Jesus—his life, his death, his resurrection, and the forgiveness found in his name. But before Peter can even finish, the

Holy Spirit falls on everyone listening. Not after a long process. Not after Peter has fully figured out what this means. While he is still speaking, the Spirit is poured out on Gentiles, and the believers who came with Peter are astonished.

That moment matters because it means God does not wait for the church to get comfortable before moving. Peter is still catching up. The others are still trying to process what they are seeing. But the Spirit does not pause for their approval. God acts first, and the church is left to decide whether it will recognize what God has already done.

That is one of the humbling truths of this chapter: the church is not the gatekeeper of the Holy Spirit. We do not decide who is eligible for grace. We do not control the timing of God's mercy. Our task is not to manage the work of God, but to recognize it, receive it, and refuse to stand in its way.

Scripture gives us repeated ways to recognize the Spirit of God at work in and through others. We can see the fruit the Spirit produces. We can see lives being drawn toward Christ. We can see gifts being used to build up the church in love. I have a wonderful conservative pastor friend who years ago told me, "Your theology makes no sense to me. It goes against everything I have ever been taught or believed. But I cannot deny that I can see the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life, and your witness for Jesus." That conversation has stayed with me all these years.

And that is where Acts 10 still confronts the church. Sometimes we spend years debating whether certain people can really belong, or whether something is or is not a "move of God" while the evidence of God's work in their lives has been sitting right in front of us all along. Sometimes the real question is not whether God is moving. The real question is whether the church is willing to admit it.

Movement 5: Once the table widens, the church cannot stay the same

Once the Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household, Peter asks the only question left: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" In other words, if God has already given them the same Spirit, who are we to deny them the same belonging? And with that, the church crosses a line from which it cannot return unchanged.

That is what makes Acts 10 such a turning point. This is not just the story of one family being welcomed. It is the story of the church becoming a different kind of church because the grace of God has gone wider than the old boundaries could contain. Once Gentiles are welcomed as full participants in the people of God, the church cannot simply go back to what it was before. And that is the deeper truth this chapter presses on us: **radical welcome changes the church and the people that practices it.**

If we really mean what we say about welcome—if we really mean that the table of Christ is wider than fear, wider than tradition, wider than our assumptions—then sooner or later the church itself will have to change. Its habits may change. Its priorities may change. Its partnerships may change. Its understanding of what faithfulness looks like may change. Because once you make room for the people God is sending, you cannot keep insisting that everything else remain exactly the same.

That is not a threat. It is simply the cost of following the Spirit.

The goal of the church is not to preserve a familiar shape at all costs. The goal is faithfulness. The goal is not to make sure St. John's always looks exactly as it has looked. The goal is to ask what obedience to Jesus Christ requires now, in this moment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. **And sometimes that means admitting that what comes next may not look exactly like what came before.**

Conclusion

Acts 10 is not just the story of Cornelius being welcomed. It is the story of Peter being changed. It is the story of a church discovering that the grace of God is bigger than the boundaries it had learned to trust. Peter began this chapter certain about who was in and who was out, certain about where the lines were, certain about what faithfulness looked like. But by the end of the story, he can no longer speak that way, because the Holy Spirit has shown him that God is doing something larger than Peter's old categories could hold. And that is where this text still meets the church now.

Because Acts 10 leaves us with a hard but holy question: **what do we do when the Holy Spirit starts pushing us beyond the limits of what is familiar?** What do we do when God's grace is wider than our comfort, and God's future looks different from our past? What do we do when faithfulness requires not just welcoming new people, but becoming a different kind of church in order to make room for what God is doing?

Peter's answer, in the end, is not complicated. He does not get every question resolved in a single afternoon. He does not receive a five-year strategic plan. **He simply reaches the point where he can no longer deny what the Spirit has made clear, and he stops standing in the way.**

That may be the most important word in this chapter for this church. Faithfulness does not always mean having every answer before we move. Sometimes faithfulness looks like having enough humility to admit that God is already at work, enough honesty to stop defending boundaries that no longer serve the gospel, and enough courage to follow where the Spirit leads next.

And maybe that is where this word meets us most directly today. Not simply in the call to welcome, but in the call to trust. To trust that if God is leading, then we do not have to be afraid of where obedience might take us. To trust that faithfulness is more important than familiarity. To trust that honoring the past does not mean refusing the future. To trust that the same Spirit who built the church in Acts is still able to guide the church now.

Lord, wherever you are widening the table, keep us from shrinking it again. Wherever you are opening a door, keep us from barricading it with fear. Wherever you are calling this church into deeper faithfulness, give us the humility to listen, the courage to follow, and the grace to trust that whatever you do next will still be held inside the mercy of Christ.

Because our calling is not to protect every familiar arrangement. Our calling is to follow Jesus. And if the Holy Spirit is widening the table, then may we have the courage to let the room be rearranged.