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“Penetrable Souls”

Acts 10

George C. Anderson

Here is how I would describe a K&W Cafeteria. It is where parents living on a minister’s salary take their seven children for a fancy meal out. At least that is what I thought when I was one of those seven children. I loved going to the K&W.

I would take my time going down the cafeteria line. Had to be strategic about what ended up on my tray because I was on a budget and each item costs something. First, choose a salad. I skipped the leafy stuff and went for the Jello Salad with a whipped cream topping. There was a double joy of taking the Jello Salad and not taking the Beet Salad.

Then choose a protein, only back then it was called “choose a meat.” I’d go for the country steak with gravy—which meant that one of my veggies had to be mashed potatoes because the way to eat country ham with gravy is to have mashed potatoes with its own gravy on top. And butter.

I was expected to get a second veggie. If Mom *wasn’t* watching, I’d grab the corn because why stop with one starch when you can have two? However, if Mom *was* looking, the second veggie had to be green. I’d grab the green beans because it was cooked with bacon and the bacon flavor would cancel out the bean flavor.

Then choose a roll and a dessert. I often chose the strawberry shortcake and then regretted it because I would be reminded that there is a difference between **strawberries** and **strawberry goo**.

I have a lot of good memories of the fine dining of a good cafeteria line.

I am going to go through chapter 10 of Acts as if it were a K & W cafeteria line. The line is long and has a lot to offer, but I’ll be selective about what I pick. My focus will be on two people who normally would not be looking to learn anything from each other—a Roman centurion and a Jewish Christian.



The chapter is long and I want to finish within the hour so I'll read one verse, verse 15, as our scripture lesson:

The voice said to [Simon Peter] again, a second time, “**What God has made clean, you must not call profane.**”

The Word of the Lord! (Thanks be to God!)

You know some people don't, some people don't change
No matter how much you love or the things you rearrange.
I hope the ones that you love grow as they age
But nothing you can do about some people, 'cause some people don't change

That's the pre-chorus in Josh Tobias' song, “Some People Don't Change.” Then comes the chorus. I can't have the chorus played for you or YouTube would remove the worship service from our channel to protect the copywrite. So, I'll sing it to you instead. I'm safe because YouTube is not going to recognize the tune. I hope I can remember the lyrics:

Some people don't change. Mm-mm
Some people don't change. Mm-mm
Some people don't change. Mm-mm
Some people don't change. Mm-mm

I'm only halfway through. Some lyrics don't change, and the line is sung over and over again.

In some ways, we can celebrate the way “**some people don't change.**” Our world needs more people

- who stay true to their word,
- who remain constant with their good values,
- who don't compromise their ethics even when it is profitable to do so,
- who don't betray the truth even when they can get away with it.

But, Tobias isn't singing about that kind of constancy. His song is a warning not to give one's heart to someone who won't change, because why *be changed* by someone who *won't change* for you?

It is also true that some people stop changing. What often destroys a relationship for a moment, for a season, and sometimes for a lifetime is when a hardening agent is added—like gelatin added to liquid to make that Jello I enjoyed at the K&W. That hardening agent in a relationship can be anger when the amygdale part of the brain takes over—the part that doesn't learn but only knows how to fight, flee or freeze. Or maybe the hardening agent is betrayal, and the vulnerability the relationship needs is lost till trust is restored. Sometimes it is disgust or, most



devastatingly, hatred. A penetrable soul suddenly hardens and the other becomes a type, a thing—something that can be defined, then dismissed, or maybe even broken.

Don't you think that these hardening agents are being applied aplenty in our polarized culture right now? I think so. If you see what I see and feel what I feel these days, then you'll have some understanding of the highly polarized culture in which Cornelious and Simon Peter live. Then as now, not everyone is hardened. Not everyone has been radicalized to an extreme. But you can't miss the extremes.

- There are Jews hardened against Gentiles, and Gentiles—especially Romans—hardened against Jews.
- Within the Jewish community, there are Zealots who are hardened against the Romans because they see them all as those who want to destroy Israel, and there are some Roman centurions who see all Jews as Zealots wanting to kill every Roman.

It is the, “[They're all alike](#),” way-of-thinking where the heart is hardened against a whole people. Those Israelis, those Palestinians; those Republicans, those Democrats; those rich people, those poor people; those refugees and immigrants; those policemen, those prisoners—they're all alike.

With this kind of polarization in mind, I want you to consider how remarkable it is that a Roman centurion and a Jewish Christian are open to the other. I want you also to hear how they are both open to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the star of this story as the book of Acts tells it. In fact, the Holy Spirit is the main character of the whole book of Acts.

We'll start with Cornelius, the Roman centurion. He is not the type one would expect to have an interest in what Jews or Christians think or believe. But what I just said already shows how hardening takes place. I called Cornelius a type, as if every Roman Centurion doesn't care what Jews think about them; they only care about their fearing them and doing what they are told. But *caring* is what this centurion is all about.

- His heart is soft toward the poor; he is well known for giving alms to help out.
- His heart is soft toward God. He is fascinated with this God of Jesus—
 - this God of the one who other centurions crucified—
 - this God of the one who preached blessings for the poor and peacemakers;
 - who called for the forgiveness of sins,
 - not returning evil for evil;
 - who didn't object to taxes being paid to Rome but who called for the kind of faith that loves God so much that it is a faith that cannot help but love others—including enemies.

Against all conventional wisdom, this man
who at times puts on the whole armor of Rome
yearns to put on the whole armor of Christ.

Like the Zealots, he wants to be liberated,
but unlike the Zealots, he wants liberation of his soul, his self.



Cornelius wants all that, and the Holy Spirit wants all that in him. That's how Acts tells the story, and that is how faith works today. Faith is *God working something in us and through us*.

The Holy Spirit comes to Cornelius and tells him that if he wants to know better the God of Christ, then get to know Simon Peter, one of his disciples. He is only 35 miles away in Joppa, staying at the house of another Simon, Simon the Tanner. So, Cornelius sends a delegation to retrieve Peter to bring him to his home.

Let's talk the reality. It takes a while to travel 35 miles. Now, being Incarnational theologians, let's talk spiritually. It takes no time at all for that same Holy Spirit to already be in Joppa talking to Simon Peter. Without the Holy Spirit, Simon Peter would be hardened against going with that delegation to see Cornelius. He's not ready to be summoned by a Roman Centurion—that's scary—and he's certainly not ready to have a conversation about faith with someone who serves an Emperor who claims to be a god. That's a different kind of scary—

So, while Simon is sleeping on the roof of the house—that's what you do in the Middle East after a hot day in the sun, you want to catch the evening breeze—while Simon sleeps on the roof he sees something.

But before I tell you what Peter sees, let me remind you *how* he sees. He doesn't see the world like we did. Peter lives in a flat, four-cornered world. The earth is flat and so is the sky above. So, when Peter sees a flat, four-cornered sheet lowered down to him, it is as if he is looking at a new earth, a new reality.

And he is *not* inspired. This is not a beautiful sight. No, it is scary, and it is gross. It is like the vision of those dystopian movies where robots are in charge, or zombies are roaming. It is not a world Peter wants to see. Because what he sees on that sheet are animals, the kind of animals that Jews don't keep and certainly don't eat. You know, the ones with cloven hooves and those that chew their cud—camels, badgers, rabbits, pigs and the like.

In his commentary on Acts, Willie James Jenkins helped me better understand how those animals represent the kind of people who would kill and eat such creatures. For Jews, who doesn't live in a time when you can go to different ethnic restaurants and try their cuisine, it is scary and gross, and even feels life-threatening, to think of slaughtering these animals and eating them. But that is what the Holy Spirit tells Peter to do in his dream. The Spirit says, "**Help yourself. Kill and eat,**" the Spirit says. And Peter responds the way I did when I was first invited to eat snails. "**I'm not going to do it. That's gross.**" To which the Spirit replies, "**What God has made acceptable you must not call gross.**"

Now here is a detail in the passage that I am shocked has not been mentioned by the commentaries on Acts I have read. Remember how Peter denied knowing Jesus *three times*? Remember how the resurrected Jesus, in a gesture of grace, asks Peter three times if he loves him and then tells him three times to "Feed my sheep." This vision Peter has of the sheet being lowered and being told to eat food that is not kosher *happens three times* before Peter wakes up. Some souls are penetrable, but it takes some work to get through.

But the Spirit does get through. In my sermon two weeks ago, I talked about how Peter was a disappointment to Paul when he refused to eat with Gentiles in Galatia. Well, we can be proud



of Peter now. When the delegation shows up, Peter hears the Spirit tell him to go with them to the home of the Roman centurion.

And he does. There you have this beautiful picture of Peter, the Christian Jew,
being open to Cornelius and his culture,
and Cornelius, the Roman Centurion
being open to Peter and his God.

The centurion, who is supposed to be respected and feared by Jews, bows down to Peter as if he wants to worship him. Peter asks him to stand, and this disciple, who so often speaks before he thinks, listens to what the Centurion must tell him. Peter wants to know more about how the Holy Spirit has worked in the centurion's life and the centurion wants to know Jesus better. Both are penetrable to the other, and it is because, in this moment, they are humble about what they think they know about the other.

Again, the author of Acts wants us to know that what is happening is the work of the Holy Spirit. At every point in this chapter, the Holy Spirit is given credit for opening hearts and minds that are tempted to be closed.

The dessert at the end of this chapter is that Cornelius asks that he and his household be baptized by Peter. And Peter shows that he has listened to Cornelius and believes what the centurion has said about God working in him even though he is a Roman centurion. Peter says, [“Can water be withheld from people to whom the Holy Spirit has spoken?”](#) The Roman household is baptized and then Cornelius invites Peter to remain for a few days as his houseguest—A Jew is treated as a member of a centurion's family.

Friends, this is church happening. I am not talking about the church in an organizational sense, but in a spiritual sense. Because these two have a faith in Christ and of Christ that compels them to have a relationship with each other. That's what Christian faith is, it is how it works. God was not hardened to humanity but became one of us to be at one with us. He joins us in our humanity. It lives as one of us, and now lives in us and through us. Peter gets to the point Paul gets to where he can say, [“It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in and through me.”](#) The Holy Spirit opens one's mind and heart to Christ, which in turns opens one's heart to others. Faith is God's love penetrating our souls, helping us to breathe; taking in and giving out, opening us not only to God but also to our neighbors—even those neighbors we are told to dismiss or oppose.

Let's be clear though. This chapter is not about what we can do on our own but what we must continue to pray for God to do in us and through us. I am going to press that point home by perhaps spoiling the story I just told you.

This story in chapter 10 of Acts *happens before* the story I told you about two Sundays ago. Two Sundays ago, I told you how Peter, who already had his vision of the sheet being lowered to him, who already had his conversation with Cornelius and was his houseguest for a few days, who was told not to call “gross” what God declares acceptable—all that already happened when refuses



to eat with Gentiles when his Jerusalem friends come to visit. It is not because he thinks it is gross, but he is afraid of his Jewish friends will think so.

Wow. What a reminder of how human even the best of us can be. What a reminder of how penetrable souls can always be subject to hardening agents like fear, anxiety, and that hardening agent I haven't mentioned before, pride which has to be right or has to win. We would like to think that spiritual lessons learned are not forgotten, that heart and souls opened can never close again. It stings when Christians are called hypocrites when we don't live up to what they say we believe. But, guess what?, we're hypocrites because we don't always live up to what we believe. How often has your best self been shocked by how easily your worst self can emerge again. How often have we seen

- good people become hateful people in a breakup,
- or kind people become cruel in what they say once they are hurt,
- or trustworthy people tell lies when it becomes too embarrassing to tell the truth.

The book of Acts lets us know that as soon as we think we have figured out what is good and right, that we now know who is always in the right and who is always in the wrong, we are in spiritual trouble.

Of course, this chapter encourages us to be open to others, to be open to what we do not yet see or understand. Of course, it encourages empathy, to have the kind of humility that our evening Bible School speaker, Tom Are, helped us understand not as deflecting praise but being so interested in another that you forget yourself. Of course, this chapter has a lot to say about how we should resist those who seek to apply their hardening agents on our spirits to enlist our blind support. But this chapter is not finally about what we should do. It is a call to prayer. We should be praying continually

- the Holy Spirit not ever stop saving us from hardening because then we become the problem,
- the Holy Spirit will keep our souls penetrable to God's love,
- that God keep working in and through us so that we have more of those moments when we can say, "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me... and through me."

And so, let us pray singing the hymn, "Spirit, Open My Heart" which includes these words:

God, replace my stony heart
With a heart that's kind and tender.
All my coldness and fear
To your grace I now surrender."

