

BARRIERS

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Acts 10:44-48

When I was a kid, any TV show or movie that involved the Cold War always included a scene set in East Berlin with someone attempting to cross the Berlin Wall. It might be a spy with crucial information; it might be an individual seeking to be reunited with a loved one. Normally, in dramatic fashion, guards would shout, shots would be fired, dogs would bark, and the person wouldn't make it.

In 1945, at the end of World War II, the defeated German territories were divided into two sections. The eastern part of the country went to the Soviet Union. The western part went to the US, Britain, and France.

The German capitol, Berlin, was located entirely within the Soviet section and post-war agreements divided that great city into two halves with the Soviets taking the eastern half, and the Allies taking the western half—East Berlin and West Berlin. West Berlin became this capitalist island in a sea of communism. It was a constant source of tension that millions of East Germans used Berlin as an exit point for the West. In the summer of 1961, as many as a thousand people a day were leaving East Germany. In August of that year, the East German government erected a barrier around West Berlin effectively sealing the border. The official purpose of this Berlin Wall was to keep Western “fascists” from entering East Germany and undermining the socialist state, but it primarily served the objective of stemming mass defections from East to West.

Initially, the barrier was a wire fence held up with concrete posts. Over time this was replaced with concrete walls. In the end, the wall was 96 miles long. It had 302 watchtowers and 20 bunkers, and it completely enclosed West Berlin.

The wall stood as a physical and psychological barrier for 28 years until November 9, 1989, when the East German Communist Party announced that citizens of the GDR could cross the border whenever they wished.

Human beings have long built walls. We build them for protection. We build them to divide. We build them to keep one group on one side and another group on the other side. Other walls you may know of include the Great Wall of China. Known to the Chinese as the Long Wall, this wall is a series of fortifications built as early as the 7th century BC generally marking the northern boundaries of China. The Long Wall is roughly 13,000 miles from end to end. In England there is Hadrian's Wall built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian in the second century AD. That wall marked the northern boundary of the Roman Empire. Northern Ireland has “Peace Walls” that separate Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. The Korean Peninsula has what is ironically named the Demilitarized Zone although it

is the most heavily armed border in the world. Israel has its Security Barrier—a 420 mile wall separating Israel from the West Bank.¹

Barriers do not have to be physical to be effective. Humans have long used cultural barriers to divide and exclude. Race, education, wealth, neighborhood, language, age, ability, genealogy—any difference we can identify has been used to set one group apart from another.

Our reading today from Acts is a significant story about one such cultural barrier. Although the reading is only a few verses long, it is actually the conclusion of a much larger story.

The Book of Acts picks up with the ascension of Jesus. From there, Acts documents the emergence of the Christian church—first in Jerusalem and then around the Mediterranean. After Jesus' ascension, his followers began to coalesce around Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on them and Peter preached and many were baptized. These new believers began living together in community as Peter and the apostles continued to lead. Peter and the others performed miracles of healing in Jesus' name. Peter is arrested. Persecution of the believers escalates and many leave Jerusalem and take their faith with them. The church begins to spread. People around the region begin to hear and accept the word of God.

But there was one question plaguing the new church and that had to do with identity. Who, exactly, are they? Is the church a subset of the Jewish faith, or is it something different, something new? Their first inclination is to be Jewish. Peter and the apostles are all devout Jews. That is what they know. They have been raised worshiping in the synagogue and temple. They have kept the Law. They are Jews.

But it is becoming clear that others outside the Jewish faith—Gentiles—are also attracted to the words and teachings of Jesus. Must these people become Jewish in order to become followers of Jesus, to be part of the church? Or, are they to be ignored?

Our story for today takes place in the coastal city of Caesarea. In Caesarea there lived a man named Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion. He was not Jewish but what was known as a God-fearer. He maintained a relationship with God and was generous with his charitable giving.

One day, while praying, Cornelius has a vision. In this vision, an angel of God instructs him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter. Joppa is a town about thirty miles down the coast. Cornelius sends two servants and a soldier to Joppa to find Peter.

¹ And for those fans of a certain TV program, there is the great ice wall that spans the northern border of Westeros.

The next day, as the men are approaching Joppa, Peter is on the roof of the house where he was staying. He is deep in prayer. While praying, he becomes hungry and asks for some food. While the food is being prepared, Peter falls into a trance and has a vision. In this vision is a large sheet held up by its corners. It was being lowered from heaven and in it are all sorts of creatures—creatures that Peter recognizes as being ritually unclean. As a Jew, he would not eat these things. A voice commands him to eat. Peter refuses saying that he has *never eaten anything that is profane or unclean*. The voice then says, *What God has made clean, you must not call profane*.

While Peter is trying to figure out the meaning of this vision, Cornelius' men arrive. The Spirit tells Peter to go with the men *without hesitation*. They have been sent. Peter follows the men back to Caesarea.

Cornelius is expecting Peter and has assembled in his home his relatives, his household, and his close friends. Cornelius greets Peter by falling to his knees and worshipping him. Peter sees the crowd that has been gathered and explains that as a Jew, he is not allowed to associate like this with Gentiles. But he recognizes that God has called him here. Cornelius explains about the vision of the angel that instructed him to send for Peter. And then Cornelius says, *So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all the Lord has commanded you to say*.

So Peter begins to preach and he shares the story of Jesus. And as he speaks, the Holy Spirit *fell upon all who heard the word*.

This is the dilemma that those in the early church found themselves—what to do about people like Cornelius who clearly had been touched by the Holy Spirit.

Peter did not come to Caesarea from Joppa alone. There were some with him that the text describes as *circumcised believers*—Jews who had become followers of Christ. You can imagine how they felt. They had been righteous, observant Jews all their lives; they had kept the Law; they had done all they were expected to do. If God made a promise to God's people then as Jews they should benefit. We've paid our dues. These Gentiles are latecomers. They don't deserve God's salvation. They haven't earned it.

Jesus, as you will recall, has already addressed this in the parable of the workers (Matthew 20). In that parable, a landowner goes out in the morning and hires men to work in his vineyard that day. He goes out again at nine a.m., noon, three p.m., and five p.m. hiring more men. At the end of the day he brings them all together and pays them all the same amount—a day's wage. Those that had worked all day complained that they should be paid more. The landowner points out that he had paid them what he promised. Was it not his right to give out what he had how he chose? In the early church many felt that as Jews, they deserved more. They had worked longer.

As Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on all those in Cornelius' house who have heard the word, and those *circumcised believers* who had traveled with Peter from Joppa were astounded to observe these people speaking in tongues and praising God. Clearly, the Holy Spirit had been poured out on these Gentiles. This is a game changer for the church. Clearly, God is free to give God's gifts however God pleases.

Peter then poses a question. He asks, *Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*

Peter's transformation did not happen overnight. It was the result of a deliberate campaign by God to change Peter's understanding on who gets into the kingdom and who does not.

When Peter asks that question, *Is there anyone here who can stop this baptism?* The answer is no. The baptism of these Gentiles has already taking place. Those with Cornelius have already been baptized by the Holy Spirit; anything Peter may do is just a formality. Can anybody stop this baptism? Can anyone stand in a rushing river and stop the current? Can anyone stop the sun from rising and crossing the sky? No. Only God.

The baptism of these Gentiles is a train that is leaving the station. Peter finally realizes that he needs to get on board or he will be left behind.

The debate on the acceptance of Gentiles into the church would not be settled here. Peter returns to Jerusalem and then is interrogated as to why he had been associating with those Gentiles in Caesarea. This tension within the church will continue for years as the Apostle Paul expands his missionary efforts beyond Jerusalem and out into the Empire.

It would continue through the history of the church, through the Reformation, and right up to today. Some of the barriers you will find today include:

How do you celebrate baptism or communion?

Who is the head of your church?

Are you saved?

Where is your family from?

Who did you vote for?

What is your position on (fill in the blank)?

If there are any barriers as to who may enter God's kingdom, it is because humans have built them. Through scripture, it is clear that God loves all of God's people and desires to draw them close. God went so far as to send God's son to shepherd us into the kingdom. As followers of Christ, our job is not just to seek the kingdom for ourselves but to bring others with us tearing down any barriers that may inhibit them. The kingdom is open and all are welcomed.