

FAILING FORWARD--Simon Peter's Story
God Uses Imperfect People
Acts 10:1-16

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/failing-forward-god-uses-imperfect-people/>

Sometimes I feel like the church needs to put a sign out front: Imperfect people, God has a job for you; perfect people need not apply." We've been learning about Simon Peter failing, but learning to fail forward. Last week, we walked with Simon Peter as he experienced the Risen Christ's forgiveness and reassignment. "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15ff).

Yes, God used Simon Peter. But how did God use him? First, on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), when thousands came to faith in Christ, guess who was preaching. He failed but failed forward. But the story gets better. This morning, our story begins with Cornelius. Several things we need to know about him. First, he is a non-Jew, an outsider. Second, he is a Roman, considered by pious Jews to be soulless, dirty pagans. And worst of all, Cornelius is a Roman soldier, a part of the empire oppressing the Jews. But here's a surprise. Cornelius doesn't fit our stereotypes. He is a God-fearer—spiritually hungry, searching, open to God's voice. There in the port city of Caesarea, he has a vision. In that vision, he is told to send for Simon Peter over in Joppa. So he dispatches some men to go get him.

Of course, Simon Peter knows nothing about all this. As Cornelius' men arrive, Peter is up on the roof about lunch time. He also has a vision in which a sheet is lowered. It's full of all kinds of animals. He's told to take and eat. But some of the food in the dream is non-kosher. Peter protests but is emphatically given a clear message: If God made it, it's not unclean (v. 15).

Let's push the pause button. Even though this dream is about food, it's not about food. It's about people. You see, the vision-dream is to prepare him to go to Caesarea and preach Jesus to someone who isn't like himself. Different language, politics, culture. The message is the same: if God made that person, that person is not unclean. Notice the sheet had to be lowered in front of Peter three times. Remember? Simon Peter is not the sharpest crayon in the box. It seems Simon Peter often needs to hear something three times (John 21:15ff). By the third time, after the sheet is lowered, Peter says, "Oh...oh...I see what you're saying!" Good job, Simon Peter! You're so quick!

Simon Peter goes to Caesarea. He preaches and these people who weren't like him experience God's forgiveness and God's love just like Peter and the insider, religious folks did. Cornelius and many other Gentiles/outsideers were drenched in the same Holy Spirit as the Jews. This experience is pivotal. I mean really pivotal...historic.

Later, in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council, the early church would be debating whether to let non-Jews in. We often think of the Apostle Paul as the champion of "salvation by grace, not works." But on that day, Peter spoke up first. "It's grace...and let me tell you how I know." He

then recounted this episode at Caesarea. At that critical moment, the church clarified its message. Salvation is what God does for us, not what we do for ourselves. And it is open to everyone. Everyone.

And it really is not too much of an exaggeration to say we wouldn't be here today if Simon Peter had not been the door that opened to all of us non-Israelites (remember Jesus' words in Matthew 16:19? "I will give you the keys of the kingdom..."). Because God used this imperfect, sometimes-messed-up fisherman, we are here!

When we grow tired of gadgets or toys that are flawed, we say we can't use them if they're broken. God says, "I can't use you till you're broken." [Christian recording artist Cynthia Clawson has a song entitled "Broken" which deals with this, from the album *Broken: Healing the Heart*]. It was the Reformer Martin Luther who said that God can ride a lame horse and God creates sculpture out of rotten wood. Amen. Aren't you glad Simon Peter didn't say, "I give up. I've done too many wrong things. God can't use me." You never know when God might be using you to open the door of faith for someone. So you and I had better not wait on perfection before you serve him! When we fail, let's fail forward.