

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
Acts 10:9-16; 34-35  
***Walk This Way: Excluding or Including***  
**August 31, 2008**

I am not sure if you realize it or not, but today's text from the book of Acts is pivotal. The story of Simon Peter's vision, changed the outlook and reach of all those who desired to follow Jesus. It shaped and is shaping still, what it means to follow Jesus, to walk his way. At its very essence, this story is concerned with how big *is* God's family.

Amy and I know a thing or two about a big family. I am one of four children, and Amy was one of five. Growing up in our house, the supper table was a place that was crowded with forks and knives, diving into the meal, and conversations entangled with the day's events. While we sometimes complained about not enough space, or not enough time, we all knew that there was something special about a big family.

Just how big *is* God's family? The narrative has two main characters: Simon Peter, whom we have read about, not only today, but throughout this series, and a man named Cornelius. Both are important to the larger story of God's big family.

First, let me talk a moment about Cornelius. We read of him in the first nine verses of Acts chapter ten. Cornelius is a Roman citizen and a centurion in the Roman army. His position was the highest rank of a noncommissioned officer. It is the loose equivalent of a sergeant major in the U.S. Army. In fact, those of you familiar with the beloved "Cotton Patch Gospels," written by Clarence Jordan, Cornelius is given the name Cornwall. Cornwall, as the loose interpretation of Acts goes, lived in Augusta, was based at Fort Gordon, and he had a vision about Peter who was living in Brunswick.

Historically, as a centurion, we may assume that he was a tough and tested veteran, who rose through the ranks, and now held great responsibility. It is important to point out, that because of his position he was trusted by as high of an authority as the emperor.

While he was assigned near Jerusalem and surrounded by Jews, he was not, strictly speaking, Jewish. What the Bible tells us is that he was "*a devout man who feared God...he gave alms generously...and prayed constantly*" (10:2). Later on in Acts we read that Cornelius was "well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation" (v. 22). Now that is an endorsement!

While Cornelius made the Jewish faith his own, he did not, strictly speaking, belong to the family of God, because he was not accepted as a Jew. He remained a Gentile.

Let's contrast Cornelius with Simon Peter. We know that Peter is by trade a fisherman, and lived among his own people in ancient Palestine in a fishing village called Capernaum. From what we know of Simon Peter as revealed in the New Testament, he was born into Judaism and lived as a Jew by faith and practice. Peter was devout in his practices, although apparently, not as strict as a Pharisee. Notice in 10:14, he states that he has never eaten anything that is not kosher, that is, prescribed by the dietary laws in Leviticus.

These are two very different men, and that point cannot be overstated. But in their differences, they both had a fresh vision from God that would bring them together. These different men with their visions would also present to the world just how big God's family is to be.

Simon Peter's vision helped him see some things that were insignificant to the good news. Dietary laws, or food taboos, was a wall that his upbringing could not bring him around until God intervened.