

Title: "What's a 3D Faith Life Look Like?"

Text: Acts 11:1-18

This Fall we have been exploring our faith using the concept of dimensions.

- We have been seeking to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is.
- And we have talked about the "upward dimension" of our faith life, and the "inward dimension," and last week the "outward dimension."

This week I'd like to show you an example from the Bible of what this 3D faith life actually looks like in a person's life.

Turn with me to Acts 11:1-18.

- Have you ever had to explain yourself to someone else?
- To defend a decision you made which someone else later called into question?

We come in on the Apostle Peter here as he is being called to account for having gone to a Roman Centurion's home to preach the gospel to a whole family of Gentiles.

---

So my friends, this story of Peter and Cornelius is the dramatic story of a major turning point in the Book of Acts, -and in the whole Bible.

God is opening the door of salvation to the whole wide world.  
-Up to this point in the Bible and in the history of salvation,  
-God has been working primarily with the Jews as his chosen people.

His intent had always been that Abraham and his descendants would ultimately be a blessing to the whole world.  
-But up until this point God's word and God's covenants and God's direct dealings have been with the Jewish people.

But now in the Book of Acts, after Jesus has come and fulfilled God's Word and fulfilled God's covenants,  
-and has died an atoning death for sin

- and has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven as Lord of all,
- God is now opening the door to bring all the nations of the earth into His covenant of grace.
  - To bring all the world under the Lordship of Jesus His Son.
- The fulfillment of God's whole plan of salvation is now unfolding.

But this is news to the Jews. It's a surprise!

- And all the early Christians including Peter were Jews!
- They didn't understand that God's plan was to include Gentiles.
  - And they were not comfortable with this idea.
  - On this issue they were still stuck in a 2D kind of faith!
  - They thought God's love was narrowly confined to Jews.

It was a shock for them to discover that God's love was wider and longer and higher and deeper than that.

And so this is a major turning point in the Bible.

- And what I want to focus our attention on this morning is:
  - the multi-dimensional way in which this unfolds for Peter and Cornelius and for the early church.

1. And the first thing I'd like you to notice is the "upward dimension" of what is happening all through this event.

God is the One who is initiating everything that happens in this story.

- The whole flow of the story begins and ends with God.
- It is God who speaks to Cornelius and tells him to send messengers to Joppa to get a man named Peter.
- It is God who speaks to Peter through a vision and exhorts him to actually go to Cornelius's house,
  - and not treat Gentiles as though they are unclean.
- It is God who pours out his Spirit on those Gentiles at Cornelius's house, and claims them as His own.

It is God who is opening the door to the Gentiles here, not Peter and Cornelius.

- The "upward dimension" is initiating the whole flow of events.

2. However, in the actual story in chapter 10, and in Peter's re-telling of the story in chapter 11,
  - we also see that there is an "inward dimension" to Peter and Cornelius's lives that is also integrally involved here.

Cornelius, we are told, is a God-fearing Gentile,

- who has been cultivating a relationship with God for many years.
- He is a Roman Centurion who has been stationed in Palestine,
  - and he has fallen in love with the Jewish God and the Jewish people.
- He has developed a prayer life, and has been giving generously to help people in need.
- He has been cultivating his soul, and God has obviously been involved in this, drawing Cornelius to Himself.

And Peter, you know his story as a disciple of Jesus,

- but the first thing we are told about him in this story is that he was in prayer when this whole thing began.
- He had gone up to the rooftop patio of the person's house where he was a guest in Joppa,
  - and he went there in order to spend time with God in prayer.

He was cultivating the upward and inward dimensions of his own life.

- His growing faith has motivated him to spend time with God in this way, and he is now in the habit of setting aside time and space in his life to be with God in prayer.

It is as he is doing this on this particular day, that God speaks to him.

- And in this case, God spoke to him in a vision.
  - It was an image of a sheet descending from heaven like a picnic blanket spread out with all kinds of food on it.
  - But the food was not kosher!
    - There were all kinds of meats and things that for Jews were considered "unclean" and forbidden to be eaten.

But the voice of God spoke three times to Peter, telling him to take and eat from the foods presented to him.

And when Peter three times refused to do so, God said, “Do not call anything impure that I have made clean.”

You see, in our faith lives we often struggle with the ways of God.

- His ways are not our ways, and prayer is the inward context in which we wrestle with God and His word to us.

And in chapter 10 we are told that Peter sat up on that roof for awhile thinking about that vision, and what it meant.

- This is what we would call “contemplative prayer.”

- He is reflecting on the Word that God has spoken to him.

  - He is chewing on it, meditating on it, absorbing it.

- In this case, he is wondering what it means.

  - He is wondering what God is actually asking him to do, and how this vision applies to his life.

And my friends, we all need time to wonder like that.

- It is part of a maturing faith life.

- It is the inward dimension of a 3D faith life.

- The upward dimension flows in and around and through us,

  - and we are meant to pay attention to it.

  - We are meant to pray and think, and contemplate and reflect, and wrestle with what is God is saying to us and doing in and around and through us.

- And we are promised the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to enable this flow and guide us in this,

  - just like happened here with Peter and Cornelius.

And you see, Cornelius is probably wrestling internally with what the angel told him to do as well.

- He is wondering why God is asking him to send for a man from Joppa named Peter.

- He is prayerfully preparing himself for whatever God wants to say to him through this man Peter.

- He is also feeling led to invite his whole extended family and network of God-fearing Gentile friends to come to listen to Peter, too.

3. And this invitation prompted by God leads us to the outward dimension.

God’s purpose is to open the doors to the Gentiles as a whole.

- But God does so by inviting Peter and Cornelius to open up their souls to Him;
- and to open their minds and hearts to each other:
  - A Jew to these Gentiles. These Gentiles to a Jew.

Specifically, God is calling Peter to become a channel of His love to a group of people Peter never would have chosen to love himself.

- In fact, Peter is being called to extend God's love to a group of people that for his whole life he felt justified in NOT loving.
- Peter thought that NOT loving these Gentile people was God's will, and was obedient to God's word.
  - But God is now taking Peter's 2D faith life and expanding it into a whole new outward dimension.

- So Peter was being challenged by God to walk in a path that Peter wasn't at all sure could be God's will.
- My friends, this perfecting of our faith often involves overcoming obstacles just like this.
    - The obstacle is in us, and in our way of seeing and thinking.
    - And God calls us to trust him, and in faith step out into new paths.

So God says quite clearly to Peter, "Three men are going to knock at the door to this house. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

- And that is all that Peter initially has to do.
- That's the first "outward step" in this "outward dimension."
  - Just go with them. Like Abraham and Sarah, just go to a land you know not of.

- And then when he gets there, Peter is asked to actually enter Cornelius's home, a Gentile home.
- Another step into the unknown for him.
- And then he is asked to simply tell these Gentiles the same good news of Jesus, which he has been telling to Jews for quite some time now.

So he does. And he is shocked to discover that before he has

- even finished speaking,  
-the Holy Spirit is poured out on these Gentiles and they come to faith in the risen Jesus.  
-They begin speaking in tongues and praising God exactly like Peter and the other early believers did at Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Do you see all of the dimensions of a living faith integrated and working together here?

- The upward and the inward and the outward all flowing together.  
-And the expansive love of God is being discovered , and it is wider and longer and higher and deeper than any of them ever imagined.

Jews and Gentiles are beginning to receive and believe the love of Christ as they relate to each other now in a new way.

- They are seeing a glimpse of the future of God's Kingdom.

Now that is a dramatic story, and it's downright miraculous.

- And you may be thinking, "Well, of course that kind of stuff is told about in the Bible, but my life doesn't work that way."  
-God has never given me a vision, or sent an angel to talk to me.

And it is true that for most of us, including me, our testimonies that are not quite this dramatic with angels and visions.

- But remember, most of Peter's life, and most of Cornelius's life was not this dramatic either.

But that doesn't mean that the dynamics of what happened in this event were not also at work in their less dramatic moments in life,

- and are not also at work in and around and through us.

The expansive love of Christ is always at work, and this 3d faith life is going on all the time,

- whether we are conscious of it or not.

And guess what? We also have testimonies of God doing rather amazing things in our lives.

I want to end today by showing you a video of testimonies from people at an inner city church in Erie, Pennsylvania.

- This is a CCCC church plant, where a young man named Chuck Nelson is the planting pastor.
- This video was put together to show at the Annual Gathering of the CCCC's in Pittsburgh last summer, -so that other churches in the Conference could see what is happening with some of our new church plants.

I want you to see it today, but particularly with an eye to the testimonies that are told.

- Listen to what these people say about how God is working in their lives,
- and compare it in your mind to this testimony that Peter gives to the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem.

You will hear folks talking about being invited in,

- being loved rather than judged,
- persevering by simply showing up week in and week out.

You will see mind and heart and strength working together for healing and wholeness and the glory of God.

See if you can hear in all these testimonies how the upward and inward and outward dimensions of faith are all at work then and now.

(Watch the video on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/229065630>)

God is still doing miracles.

- And through regular people, people who used to be a mess themselves.
- People like the Apostle Peter.
- People like those folks in downtown Erie, PA.
- People like you and me.

The upward dimension flows into the lives of people, and not only transforms them,

- but begins to flow out from them into the lives of those around them.

That's what living a 3D faith life looks like.

-How is your life 3D like the people in the video? Let's pray.