

# Courage to Dissolve Prejudice

*Sermon by Carol Wolf*

*August 5, 2012*

*St. Peters UCC Church, West Seneca*

This story in the Bible tells of a great turning point in the history of the Church.

In Acts 10:1-34 we here the story of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion who was stationed in Caesarea the headquarters of the government of Palestine. Cornelius, we read, is a God-fearing man who was considered a Gentile. He was a man who was searching for God, a man of charity and prayer and a man who tried to live close to God. He has a vision in which he is instructed to send men to seek out a man, Simon who is called Peter.

At the very moment Cornelius' servants are on their way to find this man called Peter who is located in Joppa, some 50 miles south, Peter falls into a trance in which his understanding of the law between profane or unclean is dissolved. Peter was a strict Jew and Jews believed that God had no use for the Gentiles. However, Peter was a follower of Jesus and his teaching was that God loves everyone the same. Up until this time the disciples, all Jews, were telling other Jews about Jesus.

There was a wide division between Peter and Cornelius' religions. Jews had strict laws especially food laws. Unclean in the OT meant that if you ate anything considered unclean, you were not permitted fellowship with God.

So we have 2 men with totally opposite religious beliefs. They each have a vision from God and they put their differences behind them and begin working together.

I guess you could say I grew up knowing something about prejudices. I was the oldest of 4 kids growing up on the east side of Buffalo in a German/Irish neighborhood. My parents were German. We had a small family. My dad was a truck driver and car mechanic who worked 12-14 hours a day. My mom did not work and was home all the time. They had friends in the neighborhood. They did not go to church and did not belong to any groups. We lived in our own small world.

My Dad's philosophy was 'stick to your own'. I guess you could say my parents were prejudice against everyone

who wasn't like us. But, actually a better word would be "fearful".

So when I was getting ready to go to High School, a few of my friends did not want to go to East HS which was a tough school even then. We could only get to 2 other HS's by bus, Bennett and Lafayette.

We flipped a coin, which would we go to? And LHS won. My parents weren't involved with school so they did not know I was going out of district. But my dad did know that there were Italians there.

So he told me. Stay away from the Italian boys. They're no good.

Well after a while I got to know this guy, Joe Maggio. He was in a couple of my classes and he was really nice and we got to know and like each other. So one day I asked my mom if he could come for Sunday dinner. She had a fit and said go ask your father. My father hollered at me and we argued and he said go ask your mother. Well Joe came to Sunday dinner. After dinner my dad went out to work on his car, Joe went out to see what he was doing and hours later they came in talking. After Joe left my dad said. He really seems like a nice guy. My sister and brother both married Italians.

We had moved to Main and Winspear area to a 5 bedroom house. My Mom and Dad had the bedroom downstairs and we had the 4 upstairs. The following year UB was expanding with more students but the dorms were not finished. So UB people went door to door asking if anyone would provide room and meals for a student. They would be paid by UB a good amount. My mom and dad said sure they could work it out. 2 of us would share a room for a few months. Then my parents found out it would be a Jewish girl from Long Island. My father was furious and said no way but my mom said but Paul, think of the money and it's only for a few months. So he said OK.

Well Phyllis was great. We got to know her and her family and they told all about Jewish things and that she did not have to eat Kosher while she was with us and what that was and by the time she moved into the dorms we had really gotten to know her. She kept in touch and stopped over to visit, so did her parents when they were in town. My dad and mom said she was really nice.

Then my brother went to Syracuse University and his roommate was black. Well after a while my brother called

home and asked if he could bring John with him? My parents had a fit and my father said no way would there be a black boy in our house with his daughters. My brother said, but dad, I live with him every day. So dad said OK. John came and my parents liked him. When we all went to Syracuse to see my brother, we went out to dinner with John and his parents. When my brother got married John was his Best Man. My parents said what a great guy.

I am grateful that they realized that once you got to know someone who is different that it is OK. I am grateful for those learning experiences.

My husband Dick and I attended an American Baptist Church in Tonawanda, years ago. Our Pastor Rev. Jim Morrison did something really unique at Easter one year. Instead of our Pot luck supper on Holy Thursday, he made arrangements with a Rabbi in the area to come and do an authentic Seder meal. Interestingly a few people asked- how come we are having a Jewish Seder meal? He explained Jesus was Jewish. We really learned a lot.

For 25 years I was the Administrator of a large group of doctors. It was helpful to understand some of those differences in race and culture. Then a new doctor was hired and he was Muslim. I knew nothing about that culture. I was very fortunate that Dr. Shafik took the time and had the patience to explain all about his culture, that he needed Friday's off, his dietary restrictions, Ramadan and so much more. Dr. Shafik is still our Primary Care Doctor today.

I retired 12 years ago and became more involved with the Network of Religious Communities, an Interfaith organization and had the opportunity to go to several of their Festival of Faith workshops and I learned about many other faith traditions.

A few years later I started writing for the After 50 newspaper. My column is 21<sup>st</sup> Century Spirituality-faith in Action, highlighting different groups and projects going on in WNY.

One of the Drs. I knew, Dr. Robert Stall, a geriatric Dr. who is Jewish – I heard had gotten together with Dr. Othman Shibly, a UB Dental school faculty member who is Muslim and they were attempting to counter prejudice by actively working to promote dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures. They call their project BUILDING

BRIDGES. So I contacted them to do an article for the After 50 paper. That was a year ago. I met with them and they shared with me all the programs and events they were developing in WNY. Building Bridges guiding principles are respecting each other's personal beliefs and working together for the common good. WNY is privileged to have people like Dr. Stall and Dr. Shibly, the NRC, and many others. UB medical school is doing ongoing religious and cultural programs to help medical students understand other faith traditions. Dr. Stall and Dr. Shibly invited me to be a friend of Building Bridges. I am proud to be one of the first card carrying "Friends of Building Bridges in WNY".

Look at the Olympics – a perfect example of people from all cultures, countries and religions coming together. Their theme this year is "Inspire a Generation".

When I read this story of Peter and Cornelius and other stories in our Bible, I realize they are still relevant for us today. Perhaps that is why I love the Network of Biblical Storytellers and the opportunity to explore the scripture stories more deeply. I also appreciate being a part of the United Church of Christ and all they are doing worldwide. I appreciate being a part of the United Church of Christ and all they are doing worldwide. Think about what this story says to you today in your life experience. Do you have people, in your family, who are a different culture or religion? Do you have a hard time understanding them? God says, "we are all created equal".

Let's always work to remember that. Blessings and Joy in all you are doing.

AMEN