

The Wild Card

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon, good evening to everyone. Can you hear me? Is my mic well? Yes? Good. I am extremely excited to be with you all this evening.

My name is Pastor Ramon Jackson. Folks know me around here as Pastor Ray. Came to the table church back in 2016 and helped to launch the morning service because our evening service, our lead pastor said it was extremely white and he wanted it to look a lot more.

There we go. He wanted it to look a lot more like the city. And so Pastor Richard and Pastor myself, Pastor myself, we hope to launch the morning service.

And I am extremely excited about what the table looks like. Can we just give God praise for what it looks like now? Yes, yes, yes. It does my heart so much justice to look out and see the beautiful faces and the beautiful diversity and the mixture of folks that are in this congregation.

God is doing an amazing thing. And I am so happy to be a part of what God is doing. Now, I will tell you this. I am a typical black preacher who has 15 minutes to preach.

[1 : 14] And so I'm going to do my best to fit everything into these 15 minutes that I have. So I need to get moving. But what will help me is if you participate in this with me. I'm one of those black preachers that likes to hear an amen every now and then.

Can I just get an amen? Amen. Awesome. You are alive and awake. That's a beautiful thing. Good clap. That's right. Anything that you have through. I believe that Pastor Anthony and Pastor Tanetta, they really had, you remember Uno?

You remember playing Uno? Do you remember what you could do with the wild card if you had the wild card? What happens back here? Anybody? Just throw it out. What happens when you have the wild card? You could change color, right? You also remember sometimes you would go out of the game by playing a wild card and then leave other people to do it.

I think that Pastor Anthony and Tanetta played a wild card and left me to be that person. So our scripture today, I thought actually was going to be raised.

So I'm going to grab my phone and I'm going to read it for you. It is Acts 10. If you have your word on your phone or anywhere else, you can turn to Acts 10.

[2 : 25] Yes, that's right. He got it. He knows to give me feedback. I love it.

All right. And it says, at Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing.

He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, Cornelius. Cornelius stared at him with fear. What is it, Lord? He asked. The angel answered, your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who was called Peter.

He's staying with Simon the Tanner whose house is by the sea. When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants.

[3 : 27] He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. Verse 9. About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

He became hungry and wanted something to eat. And while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

It contained all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, get up, Peter. Kill and eat.

Surely not, Lord, Peter replied. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. The voice spoke to him a second time. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

This happened three times and immediately the sheep was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped by the gate.

[4 : 33] They called out asking if Simon, who was known as Peter, is staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the spirit said to him, Simon, three men are looking for you.

Get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them for I have sent them. Peter went down and said to the men, I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?

The men replied, we have come from Cornelius the Centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.

Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. I'm going to stop there and I'm going to tell you the rest of the story. After this, Peter goes with the three men to Cornelius and they talk. And as they're talking, Cornelius shares with him what had happened. And as Cornelius shares with him what has happened, Peter is astonished because he says to him, I cannot believe it.

[5 : 36] That which God, that which I thought was unclean, the people that I thought I should not be around, the people that I thought I'd not be called to, God is proving to me that all people are now people of God.

That is our scripture. Let us pray real quickly. God, thank you. Thank you for this moment. Thank you for this time. Thank you for the seconds and hours and minutes that you've given us on today. God, you have charged me with a word. And so God, help me to bring forth your word. Decrease me and that you will increase. Allow every person in this sanctuary receive a word from you. Allow your spirit to move from breast to breast, heart to heart, mind to mind, that we might receive what you have for us in this moment. And we give you all the glory in the name of Jesus. Somebody say amen.

I've taken about eight minutes of my time, so now I have like seven minutes left. In our scripture, we meet Cornelius, who is a centurion. This qualifies him as a leader.

[6 : 37] He is a leader of probably about a thousand people, a thousand soldiers. Cornelius is in really good standing with God. The Bible says that he's an upright man.

Acts 10, 2, the message version says, he was a thoroughly good man. He led everyone in his house to live worshiply before the God.

And he was always helping people in need. And he had a habit of prayer. In other words, Pastor Richard, Cornelius is an upright man just like yourself, I believe, right?

He's an outstanding man. And he joined the army just like yourself, right? I mean, he's a good man.

The Bible records him as someone that you want to be your neighbor, right?

The good type. The guy who's a good, friendly guy. Has a good, smiling face. Has raised his kids.

Raises the folks in the community. Probably outreaches and writes people over for Kool-Aid.

[7 : 32] Just an outstanding guy. Cornelius. Cornelius, much like many people in here, is such a good guy, right? That you just want him to come over and sing songs with you and play games like you do at Becky's house, right?

Like, he's a good dude, right? Everybody say he's a good dude. Yeah, he's a good guy. So, and not only is he a good dude, but I think what God sees in Cornelius is much of what he sees in so many people throughout Scripture, he's a leader.

So, not only is he a good dude, but he teaches other people how to be good people, right? He's the kind of guy that you want your children to be able to go over and eat with and hear stories from as he tells them all about the times that he was on the field and the battles and the victories that he's won and the armies that he's led and the crusades that he's gone on.

He's a good guy. But there's only one thing, Pastor Tonevich. This good guy is a Gentile.

And so, to the Jews, it doesn't matter how good of a guy he is, he's the kind of person that's qualified to do the work, but not necessarily qualified to reap the benefits.

[8 : 51] If that doesn't resonate with you, let me bring it home a little bit. He's the black guy amongst a white generation and a white nation who is quite qualified to do the work in the fields, pick the cotton, right?

He's quite qualified as a black woman to raise white children, but he's never qualified to live the American dream. Maybe that doesn't resonate.

Let me paint the picture a little bit better. He is part of the LGBTQ community, right? And so, he is qualified to talk about God. He's qualified to even maybe sing songs and be on the worship team, but he is not qualified to be a pastor or a preacher.

He's qualified to serve in the army. But if you remember back in the 1980s and 90s, it was part of the do not ask, don't tell. So, he was qualified to serve. He was qualified to go across the seas. He was qualified to go and leave the brigade, but he was not qualified to live in his truth. This is Cornelius. He's a good dude, good stature, great person, qualified, but not qualified to reap the benefits.

[9 : 57] Some of you all understand that, right? Some of you all, this resonates with because some of us have lived that very same life. But he gets God's attention because in Acts 10 and 4, God, even though he's not qualified to mankind, even though he's not qualified to the Jews, even though he's not qualified to the hierarchy, even though he's not qualified to the system, oh, you don't have to be qualified to the system to be qualified by God.

Oh, that's a beautiful thing. Somebody ought to give grace right there. Come on and clap for God right there. Acts 10 and 4, NIV version says, your prayers and your gifts, he's talking to Cornelius, the angel says, your prayers and your gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.

The message version says it like this, your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. I wrestle with today, where are you with God?

Despite the fact that you might not be qualified by the country to be in a certain place, where is your relationship with God? Well, have you allowed the people who are the naysayers, have you allowed the folks who have said you will not belong, you don't belong, you do not look right, you do not act right, you do not live right, have you allowed them to turn you away from God?

Because the beautiful thing about Cornelius was that he still had a relationship with God, despite, despite it all. And the beautiful thing is, his faith calls him into a place that God pays him attention.

[11 : 35] And so God calls out, Cornelius, I have something for you. And I believe he's calling to the people here, right? Becky, I have something for you. Tanetta, I have something. Richard, I have something for you.

Here's the thing. So many of us, so many of us have allowed people to move us away from our relationship with God.

But God oftentimes calls the people who are least and likely expected to do great things. And that's what he does here with Cornelius.

You remember just a few acts back where Saul has the same type of calling. When Saul is called, Saul is actually not a guy who you would have thought that God would have called.

Saul actually is on the opposite side persecuting the Christians. And yet, God sees in him this leadership quality. There's something about Paul that God says, I just cannot let him go.

[12 : 39] And so he makes and prepares a way for him. He sends to Ananias. He says, Ananias, go. The same way that he now is about to call to Peter and says, Peter, go.

Next point is this. Do not let fear divide you from your call. Do not let fear divide you from your call. It doesn't make sense at first what is happening here because Peter, who is hungry, right, is starving, goes up to the roof of his place.

And in his prayer, and this has to be so, so in this time, the Jewish custom was that you probably prayed about nine times a day. And so Peter is in the midst of his prayer. But he's hungry probably because he has fasted.

And so in his fasting, he has emptied himself out. And now that he has emptied himself out, he has made room to receive what the Spirit of the Lord is saying to him.

[13 : 38] And so God calls him in his prayer. Peter, and he says, Peter, and all of a sudden there's a blanket that comes down from the heavens in his vision. And then on it are all these unclean animals, unclean by the law, of course, right, all these things that Peter has never eaten before because it's something that he's been told he should never eat.

And yet in this vision, God says to Peter, Peter, kill and eat. Peter's astonished. What on earth do you mean, God?

Like, I've never eaten any of this stuff. I will not start now. I have been of good standing. I am a good Christian. I have walked the walk of faith. I will never. I will never. I love God because God knows it always takes convincing for us sometimes to do the things that we don't know, that we know we should do.

So then he calls to Peter again. He says the second time he does the same thing. Peter, kill and eat. Peter goes, nope, that ain't me. I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not going to do it. Third time he says, Peter, kill and eat.

Peter says, all right. All right, I've been down this road enough. I know what it is when God calls. So let me not ignore the call. Anybody ever been down that road?

[14:53] God has called you to do something. God has told you to make a move. God has said, nope, I think you should just stop everything you're doing and take the road, take the train and go to New York. Just follow your dreams.

And you argue with God. No, God, that can't be me. No, God, that isn't me. No, God. But what I love about Peter is that his relationship is so strong that he comes to his senses and says, God? All right. I don't know what this means, but I'm going to follow whatever you have for me. And so Peter, Peter comes back from his vision and he's told, listen, there are some people downstairs who are here.

I want you to go see them and I want you to go with them because there is something that I have for you to do. And Peter, without rejection, follows what God has said.

He walks, he gets his folks. He lets them spend the night. He gets his folks the next day. He heads with the people that Cornelius has sent, gets a couple of his gang, and they go and they visit Cornelius.

[15:58] What I love is that you can see how Peter follows despite being unsure what God has called him to do. In Acts 10, chapter 10, verse 28, it says, Peter says, but God has shown me, Peter says this, but God has shown me not to call anyone impure or clean.

So when I was sent for, I came without raising objection. Wow. I wonder how many people in this room would move when God has told you to move.

Despite, despite not looking like what you think you should look like, despite not being who people have told you you should be, despite being black, despite being LGBTQ, despite being Asian, despite being Hispanic.

How many of us have built our relationship so strong with God that despite all of that, we move? This is what Peter does.

And so finally, finally, he gets to Cornelius, and Cornelius confirms God's instructions by recounting the story that he was told by the angel.

[17:06] He says, this is what happened. The angel told me I needed to send for you. The angel told me that I needed to call out for you, and so I was obedient to God to call you. Peter, Peter, Peter in this moment is astonished because Peter now, it all starts to make sense.

Peter recalls the vision that he has and the unclean things that were on the sheet that fell, and he's like, oh. Matter of fact, it says in verse 34, 35, Peter begins to speak.

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism. Ah, before I go on, let me just repeat it.

I now realize, Peter says, how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

At this moment, at this moment, this is a transitional place for the whole Bible. For the whole Bible. Because this is the place in the New Testament where everything shifts.

[18:17] Everybody has been told up to this point that it is only the Jew that God has come for, that it is only the Jew that can receive salvation. And yet, here it is at this point that everything shifts.

God, Peter goes, you have called not only us, the Jews, but you have called us to those who are not the Jews.

And so Peter begins to give the story of what salvation is, the Jesus story. And the Bible accounts that here in this moment, that the Gentiles, Cornelius and all of his friends and family hear the word of God.

And the Holy Spirit rains down. And they see the evidence of God and the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This story, if I had to summarize it, would come in three parts. I'm going to give you a good old Baptist three parts really quickly.

[19 : 17] One, we are called to let go of old perceptions. Most of us have grown up in church or around people in church.

We've known some other folks in church. We've understood the traditions of church. We've seen the values of church. But here, we understand the scripture in John 3 and 3.

Jesus comes and Jesus himself teaches, Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. It's here in Acts that Peter and Cornelius' story make this a very true thing, not just for the Jew, but for the Gentile, for the blacks, for the whites, for the Asians, for the straight, for the gay, for the in-between.

Jesus has come for everybody. And so we are called to let go of old perceptions. We are called to let go of the old grievances.

We are called to let go of all of the things that we were taught and all of the things that people tried to make us believe. You are not an abomination. It's in this passage that we understand that all people are made clean.

[20 : 38] And all they have to do is believe in the salvation of Jesus. The second, build your relationship and follow your call.

As you walk with Jesus, you learn to respond to your call. And in the Hebrews, chapter 11, there's this great place, Pastor Ternetta, where it talks about faith.

It defines faith for us. And in that, the author goes on to talk about Noah and Moses and Abraham, how Noah went because the burning bush calls him out.

He goes, even in his fear, he goes and he does what God asked him to do. Noah builds the ark.

Rain had never fallen before in the world. And Noah still builds an ark because he trusts God.

Abraham takes his son that God promises him to the mountaintop to sacrifice him, knowing that there's a ram in the bush. The question for you here is, are you willing to build your call so much so that despite what God, what anyone has said, that despite the fear and the intrepidation that comes from living in your truth gives, have you built yourself up enough with God that you'll walk in your faith, despite your circumstances?

[22 : 06] And lastly, lastly, this is where we'll close. I love this story. What I love about this story is that Jesus loves to prove that Jesus' love abounds to all.

Jesus ultimately plays this game of uno, and he plays a wild card. In this chapter, he sets down the wild card. What do you mean, Pastor Ray?

I'm so glad you asked. I heard you. I heard you asking me. So here's the thing. If you move to a couple chapters later, chapter 13, there are a couple of the disciples who are grouped up together. And as they group up together, the Holy Spirit speaks to both Paul and Barnabas, and he says, listen, go out. I've got a special thing for you to do. And as Paul and Barnabas go out to do the work of the Lord, they go and visit a couple of places, and they go to the Jews and the Gentiles.

The Jews at first are like, oh, my God, you're preaching our good stuff, if you will. Listen, I don't mean to offend anybody, but it's like the conservative function, right? It's like the conservatives in a room.

[23 : 10] They're like, yes, you're preaching. No, homosexuals. I love it. You're a great guy, right? And they're all happy and they're all excited. But then he does something and he says, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

I didn't come to preach that. I came to preach about Juneteenth and pride and all that stuff, too.

Like, you know what I mean? Like, and then all of the conservatives, they're like, what do you mean? What? Like, no, like, no, I thought you were doing so good.

Why? But there's this all set. So now the Jews, some of them, right, are like, okay, I might can get.

But a lot of the Jews are falling away. And so Paul and Barnabas are like, you know what?

It's okay. Because if you don't accept it, I know the people who will. And so we'll preach to the people who will listen. Because all God wants is an ear. All God needs is your ear and your faithfulness.

And so they begin to preach. They begin to preach to the Gentiles, the only people at the time who are starting to accept it. And it talks about the fact that during Acts, the Gentile church begins to grow larger and larger and larger and larger.

[24 : 15] And so let's go back. Jesus plays a wild card. Because Jesus says, I have no longer come for just one. I've come for every single color. I've come for every single race.

I've come for every manner of person. And everyone should be set free. And so as you begin to go into your discussion, what I want for you to wrestle with, I want you to, again, let go of old perceptions.

There's enough people walking around in the world committing suicide because someone told them they were never worthy enough. There's enough people who are taking drugs and overdosing on drugs because they don't feel like they're meant to be in God's kingdom.

Thank God for the table church. Thank God for Resurrection City. Aren't you glad that there are people who are telling you that you belong to the kingdom of God and there is nothing that anybody can do about it?

Second, build your relationship and follow your call. You are called by God. This scripture proves that everybody has purpose and everybody has call.

[25 : 25] So if there's anything you've ever doubted, never doubt. Never doubt because, again, Cornelius was the offset. But Cornelius trusted God enough to follow God's call.

And lastly, play the wild card. Be so daring and bold in your faith that you go around in your happy pride self, in your happy Juneteenth self, in your happy black self, in your happy Spanish self, in your happy Asian self, and live bold and live proud that you are God's chosen people.

Play the wild card like you've never played it before. Walk in your faith like you've never walked before. And trust that this is your season. This is your time.

And this is your call. Let us pray. Oh, gracious God. We thank you for your word. We thank you for your call.

We thank you for your sacrifice. God, I pray that your word has fallen like seeds on fresh ground. And that, God, today, perhaps the sun rose on somebody's seeds and it sprouted up a beautiful plant.

[26 : 42] God, maybe to someone, this was the water that they needed because they've been thirsting to hear from you. Whatever it looks like, God, don't let this be a message that has been in vain, but let it be a message that is clear.

Let it be a message that has soothed the soul and called us to higher heights in you. God, we give you all the glory because you're so worth it.

It's in the matchless name, the anointed name, and the wondrous name of Jesus that we all pray. And we seal this prayer with the words, amen. Amen. Can we give God a praise?

Amen.