

When Never Meets Now

1. Warm-up question: Jeff got the core idea for Sunday's sermon from a TV preacher named Steven Furtick. Jeff emphasized that he knows nothing about Furtick and does not intend to imply any endorsement of him. Do you ever watch TV preachers? If so, is there one you like or dislike? What's your general impression of TV preachers?
2. Jeff asked anyone who has ever disagreed with something he has said to raise their hand. He emphasized how important it is to feel free to disagree even with preachers in our own church. Have you ever disagreed with something Jeff has said? If so, what was your point of disagreement? Are you comfortable with the idea that we can gain important insights even from people we disagree with?
3. Sunday's Scripture passage told a story from the life of Simon Peter that took place shortly after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Peter was a key leader in the early church. Read Acts 10:9-23 and 34-48, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. The Mosaic Law has extensive rules defining what kind of animals and people are deemed clean and unclean. It's hard for us today to appreciate just how important these rules were to first century Jews like Peter. From the time he was born, Peter had been taught to never eat unclean foods and to never visit the home of unclean people. In verse 14, Peter emphatically says, "I have NEVER eaten anything unclean." Think about your own religious upbringing. What is a core principle that was drilled into your head and heart? Do you still embrace that core principle? How hard would it be for you to believe God wanted you to abandon that principle?
 - b. When Peter heard the voice of God telling him to "rise, kill, and eat" unclean food, what do you imagine he thought? How do you imagine he felt?
 - c. God was trying use Peter's rooftop vision to prepare him for when three "unclean" Gentile servants would show up at his house, asking him to come to the home of their master, an "unclean" Gentile Roman centurion. What point was God trying to communicate to Peter through his rooftop vision? What is the relevance of that point for us today as followers of Jesus?
 - d. In verse 20, God tells Peter that he should go to the centurion's house "NOW" and do what he thought he would "NEVER" do, *i.e.*, enter the home of an "unclean" Gentile. At this point in the story, what do you think was going on inside Peter?
 - e. It can be scary when our spiritual understanding shifts. It can feel like the proverbial slippery slope. How important is it that we be open to new spiritual insights? How do we know which spiritual principles we should always cling to and which ones we may be called to change?

4. To recap, in verse 14 Peter swore he would NEVER violate the Mosaic rules about uncleanness. But in verse 19, God tells Peter to get up and go into the home of an unclean person NOW, contrary to what Moses said. To his credit, Peter found the courage to do what God said. From all this, Steven Furtick poses a key question: In your own life, what will you do when NEVER meets NOW? We can't live with resurrection power if we're always telling ourselves we could NEVER do what God in the here-and-NOW says we should.
 - a. Tell us about a time in your life when you felt God calling you to do something NOW that you NEVER thought you could or should. Did you go with God or hesitate and hold back?
 - b. Jeff gave some examples of common NEVER statements. I could never change careers, I could never live sober, I could never love again, I could never forgive that person, I could never be a spiritual person, my life will never be good again. Where do those NEVER statements come from, and why do we so easily buy into them?
5. It's worth thinking about what separates people who rise to their NOW moments from those who don't. In our scripture passage, we see two key characteristics that enabled Peter to meet his NOW moment. **First, Peter had a listening spirit.** He was willing to listen to the voice that was speaking to him even when the voice was saying something he didn't really want to hear.
 - a. James 3:13 tells us that spiritually mature people are "easy to be entreated." That means when God or the people around us say something hard to hear, we are able to listen nondefensively, take in what they're saying, and genuinely consider it. How would you rate yourself? Are you someone who is "easy to be entreated?" Explain your answer.
 - b. Jeff said, "We'll never be able to rise above self-imposed limitations if we aren't willing to hear God – and others – when they're saying something that's hard to hear." Tell us about a time when you've had to hear or say something hard to say or hear. How did that go?
6. **Second, in our scripture story, Peter had a courageous spirit.** He dared to do something bold, *i.e.*, welcoming "unclean" Gentiles into the church without requiring them to become culturally Jewish, knowing full well that he would face tremendous criticism from his fellow Jewish Christians. But by so doing, Peter transformed Christianity from a Judean movement into a global movement. His courage unleashed resurrection power. Tell us about one of the most courageous moments in your life to date. Where did that courage come from?
7. Where in your life right NOW, do you feel God calling you to do something you NEVER thought you would or could? Are you ready to do it?

Acts 10:9-23 and 34-48, selected verses

9 About noon [one day], Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

17 Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly [three] men sent by Cornelius [a centurion of the Italian cohort] appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them.' ²¹So Peter went down to the men and said, 'I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?' ²²They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.' ²³So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.'

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The [Jewish] believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.