

## Acts 10:44-48

Our lesson today from Acts 10 is about a surprise that turned the world upside down for the early church. Up until the time of today's lesson from the book of Acts Christianity had for the most part been a Jewish sect. Samaritans were welcome, since Jesus met the woman at the well. But, before Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, which was last week's reading from Acts, no Gentiles had been welcomed. And the Ethiopian's baptism took place out in the wilderness, far from Jerusalem. Who would even know?

Our reading from today is the ending of a story that begins a few verses earlier with a Roman centurion named Cornelius, a man described by Luke, the author of Acts, as devout and generous. And he was a Gentile. Cornelius had a vision of an angel instructing him to send for a man named Simon Peter who was staying in a home in Joppa. Cornelius heeded the angel's instructions and sent three of his men to Joppa to bring Peter back with them.

While the three men were on their journey, something extraordinary was happening in Joppa. This same Simon Peter had gone up to the roof of the house where he was staying to pray and he, too, had a vision. "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 of the earth and birds of the air. 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 sheet was taken back to heaven." While Peter was pondering this vision, the three men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house where Peter was staying. And the Spirit spoke to Peter telling him to go with the three men.

The next day Peter did just that, taking with him a few of his Christian friends. When they got to the house of Cornelius, they found a large group of people gathered there, relatives and close friends of Cornelius. At first, this disturbed Peter. These were Gentiles. It was against Jewish law for him to even associate with Gentiles. But then Peter remembered his dream. God had shown him that he should not call anyone impure or unclean. He asked Cornelius why he had sent for him. Cornelius proceeded to tell him about his own vision--about the angel who had instructed him to send for Peter. He told Simon Peter that he was prepared to listen to anything he had to say.

Then Peter began to speak. And he began with some remarkable words. He said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right . . ."

"God does not show favoritism . . ." That's a radical statement even today. Every group I know expects God to show partiality to its own group. Even at football games, people want God to favor their team. Two thousand years ago in Judea, this was a particularly important theme. The Jewish people had survived by being exclusive. And even the early Christian church restricted itself to those who were circumcised Jews. Now, at God's instruction, Peter was disregarding all that. No one is to be regarded as impure or unclean. It was an amazing turnabout. Then Peter began to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. It was the testimony of one who had experienced Christ's coming-up close and personal. This brings us to our lesson for today:

"While Peter was still speaking these words," says the writer of Acts, "the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." In other words, Peter didn't even get to finish his

message. He was just getting warmed up when the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles gathered there in Cornelius' house, much like it came upon the Jews in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Suddenly these Gentiles were speaking in different languages just as they had spoken in different languages on that day when the church was born. It was an amazing event. Luke tells us that the "circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ . . ."

Peter had no idea when he awoke the day before what lay in store for him over the next 36 hours. The whole mission of the Christian community had been turned on its head. Things would never again be the same. That's what happens when the Spirit moves. Things are changed. People are changed. Social situations change.

So often, over the past half-century when we have come to this story, we have emphasized the inclusiveness of the Gospel. That's understandable. Peter suddenly realized that all people were God's children, and that he dare not refuse baptism to any because of their cultural or racial background. This truth speaks to us of the injustices in our own society. When the Spirit moves, walls come down. So generally when we come to this text the first thing we see is how the Spirit batters down the walls that separate people.

But we might also see what this move by the Spirit did for the church. When Peter baptized Cornelius and the other Gentiles, it opened the church to astounding growth. Soon those from Gentile backgrounds far outnumbered those from Jewish backgrounds. Imagine if Christianity had remained a Jewish sect. Would we have had the same impact on the world? Not by a long shot. Inclusiveness is part of God's plan for establishing God's Kingdom. This is the reason Christ came into the world--to reach out to all people.

That's who we are. That's what being the church is all about. That's what the Kingdom of God is all about. As followers of Jesus our primary goal is to minister to people, all people, and to share in the coming of God's Kingdom. Our priority as the church of Jesus Christ is to reach out to all people regardless of who they are or what they've done or where they came from. We are to do this so that the kingdoms of this world might become the Kingdom of our God. Inclusiveness is right at the heart of the Gospel. "God so loved the world . . ." You can't get more inclusive than that.

How does the Kingdom of God come? Let me tell you a story. About twenty years ago, a high school youth group headed out on their annual work camp and backpacking trip at Blue Lake Youth Camp. One of the boys who went along on that trip was from another church and didn't really know the youth or the adult leaders. His name was Ben, and he was, to put it kindly, a challenge. The leaders had been given the heads-up on Ben. He was a troubled young man who was often belligerent toward people in positions of authority. It was no mystery why he acted that way; his father was serving time in prison. The minister from Ben's church had begged the youth leaders to include Ben because he believed the experience would be good for him.

The leaders, Bob and Margie, were nervous when the trip began, but it turned out to be a positive experience. Ben had a couple of minor outbursts along the way, but Bob

and Margie were patient with him, and they treated him with more kindness than he was accustomed to experiencing. A few weeks following the trip, Ben got back together with the group to share pictures and remembrances of their special time together. That was the last time the group saw him.

Sixteen years later, Bob went back to Blue Lake Camp. While he was there, he noticed a man working on one of the cabins. He went over to the man and struck up a conversation, and it turned out that it was Ben. His story unfolded. After high school Ben went into the Marines, and then after serving six years in the Marines he went to college, where he later graduated with honors. Currently he's married, and he is in charge of the local school district's computer labs. He told Bob that the work camp experience, sixteen years earlier, had been a pivotal event in his life. It was the first time he could remember being appreciated by others and included in a group. He still cherishes the memories of that trip and the way Bob and Margie cared for him. Bob was stunned, because he had practically forgotten the trip and he had no idea what effect they had on this young man. A camping experience changed a young man's life.

Now here's what's important: Ben's name could have been Jose or, if he had been a she, it could have been Carmela. It doesn't make any difference. Only one thing matters, that the followers of Jesus Christ share his love with all people--young people or old, rich people or poor, black, brown or white, from educated families; from families where there are 2 moms or dads, or from families where Dad is in prison, all people--until that day comes when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. This is love in action. This is our task. That is our reason for being. We have no other.

All glory be to God.