

God's Surprises

Acts 10:44-48

Our lesson this morning, the tail end of the story of Peter and Cornelius, is a lesson about reverse anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is prejudice *against* the Jews. Reverse anti-Semitism is prejudice *by* the Jews *against* Gentiles. Gentiles are non-Jews. In the first-century church one of the biggest problems was what to do with Gentiles who wanted to become Christians.

Some insisted that Gentiles could only become Christians if they were circumcised and became Jews first. Others, including Peter and Paul, taught that baptism was "the new circumcision" and that Gentiles and Jews alike should be included in the big circle of God's people. Reverse anti-Semitism, like all prejudice, had to be overcome.

There were reasons for this reverse anti-Semitism. One of the reasons was the idolatry of the Gentiles who worshipped hundreds of false gods. And since the Gentiles worshipped false gods who were not gods, the chosen people of God tried to stay clear of them.

Another reason for reverse anti-Semitism was the immorality of the Gentiles. Among many other immoral practices, some Gentiles worshipped their false gods at temples that were nothing more than brothels. And the Jews and Jewish Christians would have no part of this immorality.

Separation from idolatry and immorality was clearly the way God wanted his chosen people to go, yet there was a problem. God included Gentiles in his plan of salvation. The Jews were a chosen race, but they were chosen in order that they might include all people everywhere in God's plans. They were blessed to be a blessing.

Without compromising their strict monotheism and their strong morality, they were supposed to reach out to the Gentiles and find ways to include them in God's family. Even after Jesus' words and actions about including outsiders, early Jewish Christians stubbornly resisted reaching out to Gentiles.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was a Gentile. Initially that was a big problem for Peter who, like other Jews of his time, looked down on Gentiles as inferior human beings. They were strangers and outsiders. They were the scum of the earth. They were to be avoided.

In the story of Peter and Cornelius, we find two Christian principles that fly in the face of all prejudice: inclusiveness and hospitality.

Truth is, **God is Inclusive**. The story of Peter and Cornelius begins earlier in Acts 10 where we learn that Cornelius was the Roman commander of 100 men. He was also a God-fearer. God-fearers were Gentiles who were attracted to Jewish monotheism and morality.

Cornelius and his whole family worshiped at the synagogue and tried to follow the basic principles and laws of Judaism. He was respected and appreciated because of his piety and generosity.

In Acts 10:3 we read that Cornelius had a vision in which he saw an angel of God come to him and tell him to send men to Joppa and bring back a guy name Peter. Cornelius did as he was told and as the men traveled to Joppa Peter was being prepared .

About noon the next 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 it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

He saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners.

In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times. -- Acts 10:9-16

Peter didn't know what the vision meant, but he knew it was a vision from God. The Jewish way to say this was, "this happened three times." Three is a sacred number that means wholeness.

When three visitors showed up at the door asking for Peter and then told him about Cornelius and the holy angel who had sent them, Peter was convinced he should follow their invitation to go to the Gentile's house, but first he offered the visitors hospitality, overnight lodging (Acts 10:22).

We'll talk about hospitality in a minute but note that Peter graciously welcomed the Gentile strangers and provided for their stay. Gentiles in a Jewish home! Scandalous! But Peter was beginning to understand the principle of Christian inclusiveness. Peter was beginning to understand that no people are profane to God.

And so Peter followed Cornelius' messengers from Joppa (a place where he was comfortable in the midst of other Jewish Christians) to Caesarea (a "foreign" territory in a strange land to visit a Gentile named Cornelius).

When Peter arrived at Caesarea, Cornelius fell down at his feet and worshiped him. Peter quickly said, "Stand up. I am only a mortal" (Acts 10:26). Then Peter moved into the comfort zone of Cornelius' home. This too was a scandal because Jews didn't go into the homes of Gentiles. It just wasn't done.

Peter embraced inclusiveness by witnessing to the truth of Jesus Christ and following the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

And this is where we pick up our lesson this morning:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.... -- Acts 10:44-45

After hearing the positive confession of Jesus as Lord, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Peter baptized Cornelius and his household and friends. How do we follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit today?

Inclusiveness means incorporating all people who confess Jesus as Lord into the fellowship of believers. People who are different from us who have something to teach us if we have ears to hear. People of different colors and cultures can be included in God's family if they believe.

The church is not a society of like-minded people, but a fellowship of repentant people who come under the lordship of Christ. What difference does that make for Christians today?

That brings me to the second Christian principle we see in our text this morning: **we are to show hospitality.**

First Peter provided hospitality to the Gentile messengers from Cornelius. Then Peter offered hospitality by inviting Cornelius, his family, and friends, to join him on the spiritual journey to the Father's house in heaven.

Now, another of God's surprises in this lesson, may seem inconsequential, but is huge. It's tucked away in the last line in our text: "They [Cornelius and his family and friends] invited him [Peter and his friends] to stay for several days" (Acts 10:48b). Once converted and baptized, Cornelius and his family provided hospitality for Peter, reversing the role of giver and receiver.

In other words, inclusiveness and hospitality for the Gentiles resulted in inclusiveness and hospitality by the Gentiles. Surprise. Gentile and Jewish enemies became friends. Welcoming strangers resulted in strangers turning the tables on us and blessing us. And it happens throughout scripture.

When Abraham and Sarah offered hospitality to strangers, surprise, those strangers were angels with the amazing message that these two old people would soon be blessed with a baby boy. Surprise again. Sarah laughed at the idea, but the baby was born and named Isaac (which is translated laughter, joy).

Paul was a missionary to the Gentiles. He was criticized for it, stoned for it, near death on several occasions because of it, but he drove on to bring the good news of Jesus to Gentile strangers of all the known world of his time. In Ephesians, Paul says that this inclusiveness and hospitality means that enemies become friends in Christ. Surprise.

In Christ, walls that previously separated people are broken down. Paul calls this oneness of opposing peoples "a mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things" (Ephesians 3:9).

And this mystery, wonder, and surprise that God reveals to the world is through his messengers, you and me, who bring the good news to God's people.

Have you ever noticed that tucked away in the middle of the word "evangelism" is the word "angel." To evangelize is to be in the business of being God's angels.

What does that mean for our lives today that there are angels in our midst?

God has a big circle into which he intends to draw all of us, Gentiles and Jews, people of all colors and kinds, young and old, married, single, and widowed. When Christians include others in their circle of concern, Christians are angels at work for the kingdom, often without even knowing all that they've done.

When someone leaves his or her comfort zone at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and ventures into the comfort zone of others, God provides wonderful miracles. Another of God's surprises.

When we show hospitality to strangers, and are inclusive in our behavior, instead of living in our own little world, we may just be angels in disguise. Let's strive to be that angel this week.